

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAY 2002 **MAGAZINE**

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— with a different kind of fire  
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Goulart  
Cohen

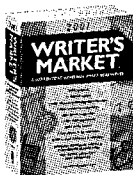
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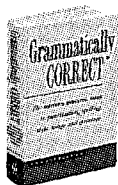


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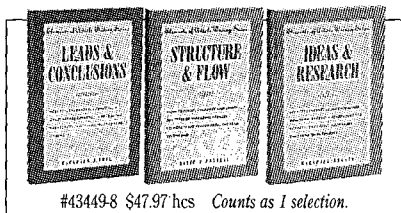
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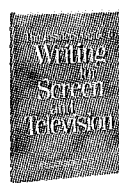
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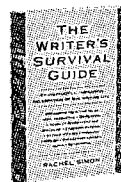
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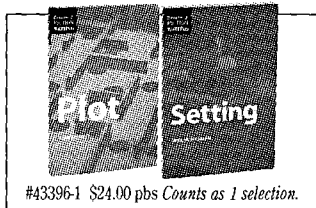
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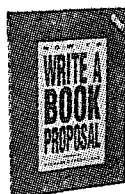
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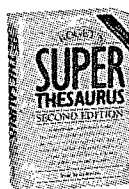
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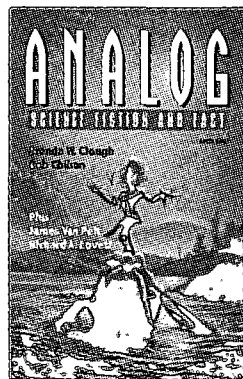
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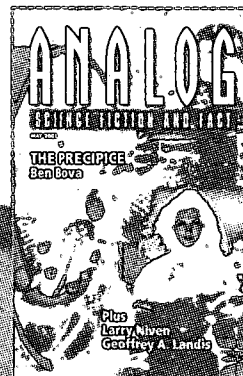
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

**T**hree new(ish) authors to introduce in this issue . . .

"The Bond That Keeps" is R. T. Lawton's second story for us. "I live on the east slope of the



Black Hills, where I occasionally help some of my neighbors with their bull sales, calf brandings, and building barbwire fences. My wife and I enjoy touring through [the West] on our Road King Classic. The countryside is beautiful from the seat of a Harley."

Edmund X. DeJesús ("Troublemaker") has a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Rhode Island. A freelance technical writer, he's been a college professor, an editor of *BYTE* magazine, and a defense researcher with such jobs as "analyzing Soviet missile launch

data and writing software to keep subs from bumping into things." His mystery novel *The Law of Falling Bodies* is available by print-on-demand from iUniverse at online bookstores or at [www.tlofb.com](http://www.tlofb.com).

S. K. O'Toole ("No Disclosure"), also a technical writer, is a native of Fort Worth

and a graduate of Baylor University. "I grew up as part (eldest son) of a preacher's family. Instead of entering the min-



istry, I rebelled and delved into the counterculture. . . . I've almost grown out of all that. I've been a door-to-door salesman. I've sold cars and pretty much anything else. . . . I did," he says, "outgrow that. But I've never outgrown the need to write."

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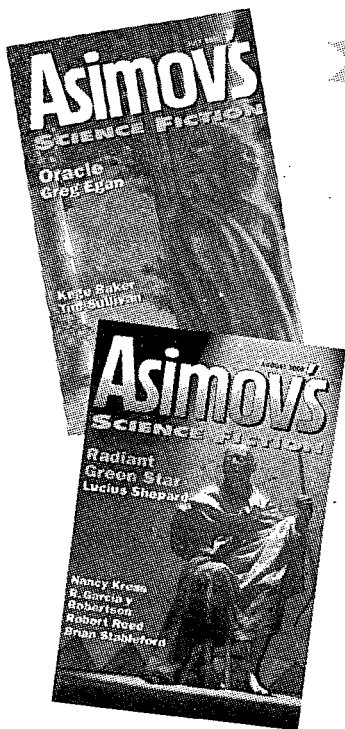
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FICTION

# FLASHPOINT

John H. Dirckx

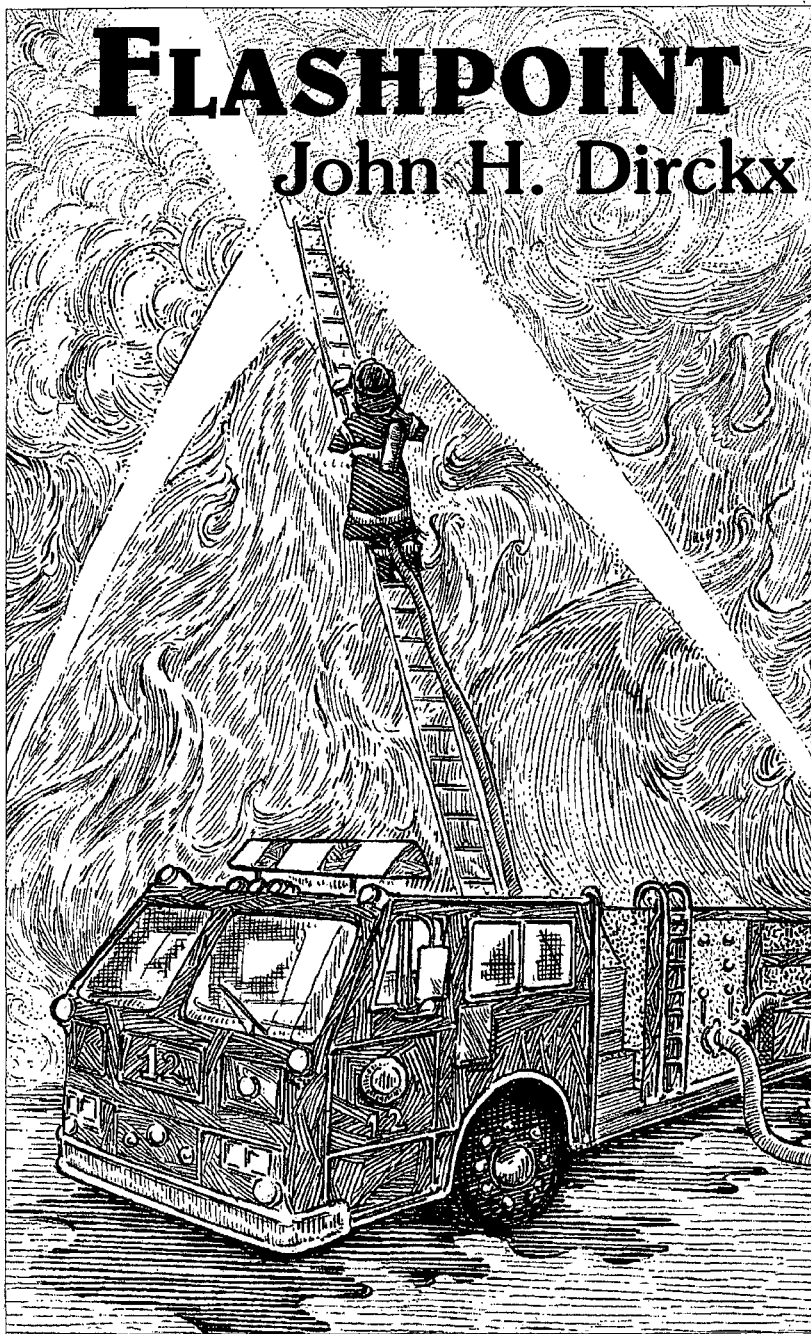


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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 502

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**T**he shortest night of the year had barely reached the stage of maximum darkness when a vague luminescence began to show again in the sky to the east. In the stand of old oaks and maples at the southeast corner of Willoughby Mall, a few birds woke up and started complaining perfunctorily about the shortness of their rest. A dry, moaning wind swept across the vast, empty parking lot, scattering dust and debris before it and sending ripples through the rank grass that fringed the pavement.

The night man at Steve's Day-Night Willoughby Mall Coffeeshop was just working up the courage to scour out the ten quart coffee urn and change the filter. Opposite the coffeeshop, the two story red brick building whose lower level was occupied by a sporting goods superstore slept in blithe unawareness of impending disaster. In its attic crawlspace, still stuffy with the previous day's heat, pungent chemical vapors swirled in darkness, while the bimetallic strip of the thermostat that controlled the exhaust fan in the middle of the roof moved, by infinitesimal gradations, towards an electrical contact.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn's watch read nine twelve A.M. when he arrived at Willoughby Mall and parked as close as possible to the center of the chaos. Red, white, yellow, and blue lights spun and blinked everywhere, on firetrucks, police cruisers, ambulances, and other city vehicles. The entrance from State Route 85 was

closed. A crowd of onlookers and an impossible tangle of traffic surged outside barricades and festoons of yellow tape.

Within the perimeter, firemen in slickers and helmets hefted axes, shifted hoses, talked in small groups, and sipped coffee. One of the three firetrucks had its aerial ladder deployed against the end of the building housing a sporting goods supermarket called The Word "GO!", and a couple of firemen wearing air bottles and masks could be seen working on the roof of the building.

Rivulets of water from the hoses meandered across the asphalt, split and rejoined, formed puddles. The day was already warm, the sun bright. A gray-brown haze drifted low in the sky over the mall, and an acrid smell of smoke, suggesting a garbage dump on fire, hung in the air.

Auburn stepped over a stretch of yellow tape, his I.D. ready in case of need, but the uniformed policeman who saw him first recognized him. "Hi, sergeant. Fire guys won't let anybody in yet. Mr. Stamaty from the coroner's office is over there in his van."

"I saw him. Where's Chief Larkin?"

He found the fire chief chugging coffee in the doorway of the coffeeshop, which faced the burned building across about fifty yards of parking lot. "Just get here?" asked Larkin. "Who have you talked to?"

"Nobody here. All I know is that there was an explosion and a fire on the upper level and your guys found one body."

"So far. They're still in there." Larkin had a round Irish face, lumpy and dimpled like a potato. "Looks like electrical. Got a warrant?"

"It's on the way. Any signs of setting?"

The chief winked with both eyes, a favorite trick of his. "That's your job."

Several months earlier Auburn had completed a course of training as an arson investigator. He was certified by an insurance underwriters' organization and permanently assigned to the Fire and Rescue Department on an on-call basis. A fire on business premises was presumed arson until a thorough investigation had failed to turn up any proof of foul play. And a body on those premises increased the probability of a criminal prosecution, either for aggravated arson or for homicide with an attempt at concealment by firesetting.

That was why a search warrant was essential before he started working. Time and time again, courts had rejected the most blatant evidence of firesetting when it had been gathered by search-and-seizure on private property without a warrant.

"Any I.D. on the body?" Auburn asked.

"Tentative. Woman who worked in that left-hand office on the upper level. Publishing company."

"Has the next of kin been notified?"

"They're checking. Apparently she was divorced. They can't find any family locally."

The entire first floor of the build-

ing was occupied by The Word "GO!," which purveyed uniforms, equipment, and accessories for more than a hundred sports. At each of the front corners of the building a doorway opened to a foyer, with restrooms and pay phones, from which you could either enter the sporting goods store or take a stairway to the upper level. Signs above the doorways indicated that a tanning parlor was situated over the right half of the store, and the offices of Queendom Press over the left half.

"Has anybody been in touch with the owners yet?"

"The owner of the building is that fat guy right over there. Owns the building *and* the business on the ground floor. Name's Cavanaca. You ought to get with the night man in the coffeeshop here first, though. He's the one who called in the fire, and he wants to go home."

Auburn slipped a three-by-five-inch file card from an inside pocket and went into the coffeeshop. The night man, whose name was Densil Moody, looked as if he hadn't slept for days.

"I was pulling the filter out of the coffee urn," said Moody, "when I seen this big orange flash up over the building, out of the corner of my eye. I said, 'I guess somebody's celebrating the Fourth a couple of weeks early.' Then, a half a second later, there come this thud like somebody bounced a bowling ball off the window, and I heard it echoing all over the lot out there. When I seen flames shooting out the roof, I grabbed the phone."

"Did you see anybody around the



building, right before or right after the explosion?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know any of the people who work over there?"

"Just the ones from Queendom—that's the publishers. I come in at midnight, and by then the store and the tanning place are shut down. But the Queendom people work nights a lot, and sometimes they get tired of making their own coffee."

"Were they around last night?"

"Not that I saw. Not in here."

"Have you noticed any unusual activity at all over there lately? Any trucks at night, moving things in or out?"

"Trucks I probably wouldn't see. The loading dock's around on the other side of the building."

He sent Moody home. Outside, Larkin was being besieged simultaneously by the proprietor of the coffeshop and by Cavanaca, the owner of the building. The coffeshop man complained that public access to his business was being unwarrantably blocked. Cavanaca's jeremiad, liberally seasoned with profanity, was much more complicated.

Cavanaca was about fifty, fleshy and deeply tanned, with thinning black hair as stiff as wire. He'd had an eyelid job and wore lots of gold on his fingers and wrists and around his neck. He was griping that Fire and Rescue's hoses had done more damage to the merchandise on the first level than any fire that started on the second level could possibly have done. The firemen had also broken open every

exterior door in the place, leaving the store vulnerable to looters. And they were up there now, chopping holes in the roof even though nobody had seen any smoke for the past half hour. Besides that, they wouldn't let him into his own store so he and his staff could assess the damage, prevent further losses . . .

Larkin was about as sensitive to verbal abuse as a fire hydrant. "You can go in whenever the professional firefighters have determined there's no risk of structural collapse, no toxic fumes, no danger from damaged power or gas lines, and nothing smoldering anywhere on the premises. Not before. That's a city ordinance. Ask this guy here. He's the ranking cop on the scene."

Auburn showed identification and recorded Cavanaca's first name, which was Leon, and other personal data.

"Your insurance will pay water damage as well as fire and smoke damage," he said, trying to start on a positive note. "You do have insurance, right?"

"Sure I've got insurance. You don't build up a six million dollar business from scratch and not carry insurance on it. So what?"

"It looks like most of the fire damage is on the upper level where the fire started. I imagine your tenants carry their own insurance on contents?"

"They're crazy if they don't."

"The firefighters think the fire might have been electrical. Are you aware of any electrical problems in the building, any recent changes, installations, repairs?"

"No, sir. But those tanning beds

draw a lot of juice. Could have been a glitch with one of them."

"Any explosives or flammable materials stored on the premises that you know of?"

"Shouldn't be. Aren't any in my place."

"Do you have keys to the upper level?"

"My building manager does. We provide maintenance and house-keeping to the tenants."

"Have there been any conflicts in the building lately—people getting fired, complaining, making threats?"

"Not on my level." For the first time, fleetingly, Cavanaca looked him in the eye. "You thinking arson?"

"I get paid to think arson. What time did you get here this morning?"

"I come in at eight o'clock seven days a week. I saw the smoke half a mile away."

"How late were you here yesterday?"

"The store closed at six yesterday. I probably left about a quarter past."

"Anybody on the premises when you left?"

"The head cashier was still checking the cash registers, and a couple of the sales staff were restocking."

"Are those people around this morning?"

"I haven't seen them. I imagine when they saw the barricades they headed back home."

Chief Larkin caught Auburn's eye. "Here comes your man."

Auburn looked up to see Kestrel,

the police evidence technician, climbing over a strand of plastic tape with a research case in one hand and a camera in the other. He put the case on the ground, pulled a folded document out of an inside pocket, and handed it to Auburn.

Kestrel had an incredible talent for ferreting out trace evidence at a crime scene and in the lab he was a wizard, but he shied away from confrontations. It was Auburn who served the search warrant on Cavanaca.

The store owner's indignation went up a couple of degrees. "So what does this mean—you think I torched my own place?"

"No, sir. But if this is an arson fire, I'm going to have to find out who set it, and be able to prove it in court. If there are any loose ends, your insurance company could weasel out of paying."

Two firemen reported to Larkin that the building looked safe enough for a walk-through. Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, summoned with whistles and shouts, left his van and joined the inspection team along with Auburn and Kestrel.

They went in by the west entrance. Its glass door had been wrenched bodily from its frame and was lying inside on the floor. The smell of burnt wood, plastic, rubber, and chemicals caught Auburn by the throat. Water dripped everywhere, trickled down the stairs, and stood on the floor in sheets and puddles. At the foot of the stairs a sign read KANKUN NATURAL TAN—NEW GIANT BEDS. They went up,

the firemen's boots squeaking raucously on the ribbed treads of the stairs.

The reception area for the tanning parlor at the head of the stairs was illuminated by a big picture window. The only damage here was from water, which had turned the carpet into a swamp. Along one wall was a rack of health foods, ginseng tea, aloe shampoo, apricot skin conditioner, and dozens of similar products. An oldish cash register stood at the end of the counter with a key in the lock and the drawer open and empty.

The rest of the suite had no natural lighting, and since the power to the building was cut off, they depended on flashlights. The tanning parlor was a maze of twisting passages and tiny rooms, each room almost completely filled by a tanning bed. As they approached the middle of the building, fire damage became increasingly apparent.

The interior walls were of standard construction, drywall on wooden two-by-fours, and the ceilings were of plaster. The flames had completely devoured a ten foot stretch of wall, creating a passage between the tanning parlor and the publishing offices that occupied the other half of the upper level.

The ceiling was burned away here as well. Between the ceiling and the nearly flat roof was an unfinished crawlspace in which a large exhaust fan, buckled and blackened with soot, sagged from insecure moorings. Through the opening in the roof that had formerly been occupied by the fan and other holes made by flames and en-

larged by fire axes, they could see patches of dazzling summer sky.

Since the exhaust fan was at the center of the damage, Larkin and his men speculated that its motor or wiring had been the source of the fire. But that left unexplained the explosion heard by the coffee-shop man and dozens of other people. There were plenty of other electrical appliances in sight—a couple of tanning beds that now looked like giant toasted marshmallows, a radio, and, on the other side of the divide, in the publishing office, a coffeemaker, a microwave oven, another radio. But at first glance there was no sign of anything that might have contained any explosive material. Auburn foresaw hours of painstaking work here for Kestrel and himself.

The heat inside the building, ventilated now only by the holes in its roof, was stifling. The firefighters, still in full rig minus air masks, were sweating like foundry workers by the time the party came to the body. It was that of a middle-aged Caucasian woman, athletic of build with graying hair. She lay facedown in a storage area equipped with steel shelving and cabinets that was directly below the damaged fan, on the side of the building occupied by the publishing business.

There was no indication that she had made any effort to escape the fire. Her hair and clothing were only slightly singed, and presumably she had died of smoke inhalation unless she had been killed by the explosion or had already been dead when the fire started.



While Stamaty and Kestrel were busy photographing the body and its surroundings, Auburn moved on into the publishing office for a look around. Most of this half of the second level consisted of a single large work area with cubicles separated by low dividers. Several computers, including expensive-looking scanners and printers, had been badly damaged by heat and water.

There was no identification on the body, but the first firefighters on the scene had found a purse containing a driver's license and other I.D.'s belonging to Sarah Martindale, and the facial features in the photos were pretty obviously those of the deceased. Chief Larkin had already ascertained from Cavanaca that Sarah Martindale was the owner of Queendom Press.

While Kestrel was busy bagging and tagging specimens and Stamaty was taking measurements and making a scale drawing of the scene, Auburn thoroughly inspected the zone of greatest damage. A huge mass of books that had been stacked on the floor in the storage area showed severe external charring, but owing to their density they'd been largely unconsumed when the water from above extinguished the flames. Probing the sodden, crumbling, scorched leaves, Auburn noted that most of the books in the heap were decades-old novels.

Whereas the entire tanning parlor was carpeted, the floor in the publishing office was finished in vinyl tile. Near where the body lay, and directly below the roof fan, was

a discolored patch of tile, almost perfectly round, that didn't match up with any of the fire damage.

Amid the soggy, charred debris, Auburn turned up what must have been a trapdoor or hatch that had covered an opening from the storage area to the attic crawlspace. It consisted of a square of wafer-board sheathing with a square of painted drywall cemented to it. It had no hinges and must have rested loose over the opening.

Auburn and Kestrel made preliminary examinations of a coffee-maker and a microwave oven, both severely damaged by the fire. Investigation of the mechanism and wiring of the rooftop fan would have to wait until they could get safe access to the attic.

The others had strayed into the lobby of the publishing office, where Auburn and Kestrel eventually followed. As at the other end of the building, there was natural lighting here and a carpet that gurgled underfoot like a wet sponge. Paperback novels with garish covers were displayed in racks and glass cases.

They went down the stairs at that end of the building and made a quick tour of the sporting goods store. Cavanaca's insurance company was going to have to fork out plenty for smoke and water damage, and in the long run he'd probably come out ahead by holding a fire sale.

Once back in the sunshine and fresh air, the party broke up. Stamaty went to call in an order for the removal of the body to the mortuary, and Kestrel disappeared into

the back of the evidence van, probably to wash up at its richly appointed laboratory sink.

A uniformed police officer flagged down Auburn to tell him that the people from the upstairs businesses in the burned building were in the coffeeshop waiting to be interviewed.

Although public access to the coffeeshop was still officially blocked, the place was thronged by police and fire personnel. Some of them were enjoying cold drinks, but most of them were just borrowing the shade and the air conditioning.

As Auburn entered, a man in his forties popped up out of a booth and collared him. "You the fire detective?" he asked. He had tattoos on both arms and both forearms, and his teeth looked like a mouthful of broken china. A navy blue blazer with gold buttons hung over the back of the booth.

Auburn wiped his hands on a paper napkin before pulling out a file card. "Your name, sir?"

"Buford Godsey. When can I get in there and see how much damage I got?"

"That depends on the Fire and Rescue people. I was just up there, and I can tell you the damage to the tanning parlor is pretty severe. Do you carry insurance on your equipment?"

"No, sir, I don't. I'm just a franchisee. Kankun owns the equipment, pays the rent on the space, and all like that. All I do is sweep the credit cards and switch on the ovens."

"How many people do you employ up there?"

"Right now, none. Keeps down the overhead, know what I mean?"

"What time did you get here this morning?"

"About an hour ago. Heard about the fire on the news. We normally don't open till ten."

"I saw your hours on the door. We think the fire may have been electrical. Have you had any trouble with any of your equipment lately?"

"No, sir." Godsey kept nervously rocking back on his heels and jingling coins in his pocket. "Those beds pull a lot of watts, but they've got breakers and pilot lights and fuses on them like a nuclear power plant. And there's no way one of them is going to turn itself on in the middle of the night."

"What time did you lock up yesterday?"

"Few minutes after eight last night."

"Have you had any particular trouble with *people* lately? Dissatisfied customers? Former employees? Any complaints, threats?"

"Not as I'm aware of."

"Any explosive or flammable materials stored in your place?"

"Absolutely not."

He dismissed Godsey and turned his attention to the people from Queendom Press—an African-American woman and a Caucasian man, both around thirty, who had been waiting patiently on stools at the counter. Patiently, but hardly in silence. The man, at least, seemed to fancy himself a born comedian, and kept reeling off one-liners with dreary monotony.

"Sorry to keep you folks waiting,"

said Auburn. "I believe you're aware that we've tentatively identified the body upstairs as that of your boss, Sarah Martindale?"

"We're bearing up somehow," groaned the man in an exaggerated parody of grief. He was wearing sandals without socks and a shrieking orange ball cap with a visor like a flour scoop.

Auburn decided he'd rather talk to the woman first. Her complexion was like satin, and her facial features possessed that exquisite degree of perfection that turns some men's knees to water. He leaned against the counter and took out a file card. "Can I ask your name, miss?"

"Sam Walker," she replied, all business.

"Is Sam a nickname?"

"Short for LaSamba."

He recorded a few more particulars. "What kind of work do you do at Queendom Press?"

"Copy editor."

"When was the last time you were up in the office?"

"We've just been trying to figure that out. We work odd hours."

"Worked," said her companion. "It was after seven when we left last night. The sun was already behind the Pilgrim Store. And Geoff was famished."

"Your full name, sir?"

"Geoff Bannister. To know me is to forgive me."

Auburn verified the spelling and got other data. "What should I be forgiving you for?"

"Just for being Geoff," said Bannister with a simper and a giggle.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Editor, same like Sam. Make that same *as* Sam."

"So does that mean you fix split infinitives and dangling participles?" It was hard not to like this euphoric, boisterous nitwit.

"Nowadays," said the woman, "it mainly means staying politically correct. And not letting your author commit libel."

"I saw some of your books in the lobby upstairs," said Auburn. "Is that what you mostly do—paperback novels?"

"That's *all* we do," said Bannister. "You've heard of Romaine Bouci-cault?"

Auburn shrugged mutely.

"You mean you don't know and revere the grand duchess of Gothic romance? Your education has been sadly neglected."

Auburn tried to remember the titles of some of the books he'd seen upstairs. "Is she the one who writes stuff like *The Curse of Blood Castle* and *The Bride of Wolfstone Manor*?"

"There you go. But those are Ophelia Rountree's titles. We've got—we had—a whole stable of writers churning out romances in six categories."

"Do they work there in the office, too?"

Sam Walker shook her head. "Never. Sarah's little sweatshop was strictly an editorial operation—just she and Geoff and I. The writers all work off-site, and the cover art, printing, binding, and marketing are all outsourced."

"Was it normal for Ms. Martindale to be working in the office during the night?"

"Oh sure. She worked as hard as



we did. The trouble was, she pocketed most of the income from the business—insisted on paying us salaries instead of royalties.”

“Was she there when you left yesterday?”

They agreed that she was and that that was the last time they’d seen her or had any communication with her.

“So it looks to me like we’re both out of work,” said Bannister. “The boss is dead, and since the place was burning like beeswax when I arrived on the scene, I assume all our stuff is in a state of acute and terminal meltdown.”

“The computers do look pretty bad,” conceded Auburn. “What time did you get here?”

“Sevenish,” said Bannister. “I’m a morning person.”

“Do you both have keys to the office?”

They did. “Are either of you aware of any electrical problems in the building lately?”

“That big fan on the roof,” said Ms. Walker. She put two fingers to each temple like somebody with a headache. “Every time it comes on you hear this gigantic spark in the attic. And this time of the year that’s about every twenty minutes, day and night.”

“Was that ever reported to the owner of the building?”

“I’m sure it was. Sarah complained about it constantly.”

“It might have been the source of the fire. There was a trapdoor there in a storage area. Was that ever propped open?”

Not that they could remember. Auburn asked what sort of materi-

als were stored in the room under the trapdoor.

“Just paper products, floppies, cleaning equipment—stuff like that.”

“No explosives or flammable materials on the premises? Such as lots of hardback novels—old ones?”

They exchanged a look that Auburn would have sworn betokened embarrassment. “Research materials,” Ms. Walker assured him, wide-eyed and solemn.

As he was leaving the coffeeshop he heard Bannister say to the man behind the counter, “*Garçon*, how about topping off my body fluids?”

Auburn walked all the way around the burned building, noting that the loading dock for The Word “GO!” was concealed from view in all directions, partly by the building itself and partly by privacy fencing and trees along the east and south margins of the mall property.

An aerial ladder was still in position against one end of the building. After a brief parley with Larkin, Auburn climbed the ladder and stepped over the low parapet onto the tarred and graveled roof. From here he had a view of the entire mall, where confusion and congestion still reigned.

The fan that had collapsed had been situated at the geometric center of the roof. An identical fan stood near each end of the building. Auburn examined one of the intact ones carefully. Its huge curved blades were mounted on a barrel-shaped rotor that turned lazily in the breeze. He gave the damaged part of the roof a wide berth.

From the ground he'd noticed a vertical steel ladder mounted on the back of the building. He thought of climbing down it until he saw signs that someone else had recently disturbed the coating of rust on the upper rungs. Descending as he had gone up, he pursued his investigation of the area around the building.

He searched a narrow patch of grass along the margin of the mall, poked in the weeds behind the privacy fence, and explored a rocky culvert through which a fetid stream, augmented by runoff from the fire hoses, passed under the highway.

A large waste container stood in the driveway behind the burned building. Since Auburn's clothes and shoes were already damp and smeared with soot, he climbed in, still hidden from public view. Fortunately he didn't need to dig through the mass of unsavory refuse that had been crammed into the container because what he was looking for lay right on top. One at a time he fished up four empty plastic bottles by slipping a pen through their handles and tossed them out on the ground.

The bottles were identical—brown, pint-sized, flat, with loop handles and long straight necks, their childproof caps loosely in place. They had contained a gas-line de-icer called LineDrive, whose formula included diethyl ether and petroleum distillates. The labels screamed warnings about using only with proper ventilation, avoiding open flames and sparks, and not inducing vomiting if ingested.

Auburn strung the bottles on a scrap of baling wire from the trash container and delivered them personally to Kestrel. He found the evidence technician in the back of his van meticulously sorting and labeling specimens and advised him to visit the roof of the building with his camera. Then he found Larkin, who was still busy politely telling indignant citizens to go chase themselves.

"Did any of your people go up that iron ladder on the back of the building?" Auburn asked him.

"If they did they'll get two weeks' suspension."

Auburn told him about the marks on the ladder and the bottles of LineDrive he'd found.

"Doesn't sound like a professional torch, does it?" commented Larkin. "Leaving the evidence right where you'd find it?"

The ambulance and two of the fire engines had disappeared, but a broad expanse of parking lot around the burned building was still barricaded off. Auburn talked briefly to the people at three stores in a row that stretched east from the coffee-shop and faced The Word "GO!" None of them had been around after dark the night before or had seen anything or anybody suspicious lately.

Having had about enough of Steve's Day-Night Willoughby Mall Coffeeshop, he hiked across an acre or so of parking lot to a fast-food restaurant for lunch. For a while the fascination of watching the people around him banished all thought of the fire from his mind.

But the fire recaptured his full

attention when he happened to glance at an overhead TV screen off to his right and saw a newsbrief showing flames shooting from the top of The Word "GO!" against a dark sky, and firemen placing hoses. Among the figures in yellow slickers and helmets was one with a full beard and hair hanging below his shoulders.

With the uneaten half of his burger in one hand and his drink in the other, Auburn left the restaurant in search of Larkin. He tracked down the fire chief in the cab of the remaining engine, the one whose aerial ladder still leaned against the building. Larkin moved the remains of his lunch to the top of the dashboard computer and made room for Auburn to climb up beside him. When Auburn told him what he'd just seen on TV, the chief expressed polite incredulity.

"Couldn't happen," he said, shaking his head. "A guy with a full beard couldn't get a job as a firefighter anywhere in this state, not even as a volunteer. Over a beard you can't get a tight seal with an air mask."

Auburn knew that perfectly well, but he stuck to his story. Larkin got on the radio, first to headquarters and then to the television station. With quiet authority he arranged a private showing of all videotapes from the fire for himself and Auburn as soon as they could get to the station. They went in the chief's car.

After they'd viewed the tape, there was no further question as to what Auburn had seen. A man impersonating a firefighter had been

at the scene of the fire shortly after it started, before it was light. The director of the TV newsroom made them a copy of the tape and promised to review file footage of other fires on request.

They went on to Fire and Rescue headquarters on Gates Street and met with Captain Owring, Auburn's liaison in arson surveillance. Together they worked up a list of possible arson fires for the past two years. Then the chief got on the phone to the television station again, and also called the other local station.

Since his car was still at Wiloughby Mall, Auburn walked the six blocks to the newspaper office in sweltering heat and humidity. A former schoolmate was in charge of the newspaper file room, and Auburn could always count on his cooperation when he needed it.

"Hansen," he said, handing over the list, "I want all the pictures you've got of the fires that happened on these dates."

"All the . . ."

"Pictures."

"Of these fires?"

"Those fires. Right here. On the counter. Now." They always made a game of it, Auburn pretending to be demanding and obnoxious, Hansen feigning stupidity and indolence.

Within half an hour they found a picture of a bearded man in firefighting gear at the scene of a fire in a partially unoccupied slum tenement. The fire had occurred just seven weeks earlier, and Auburn remembered the investigation perfectly. The building had been vandalized before, and arson was sus-

pected, but as in the case of the present fire, an electrical problem couldn't be ruled out.

Auburn returned to Fire and Rescue headquarters with the original color print from which the newspaper picture had been made. "Obviously the same crazy dude," was Larkin's tight-lipped comment. "Same helmet, too, with no fire company logo or number on it."

The television stations hadn't come up with other shots of a bearded fireman. Together Auburn and Larkin put together an appeal to the public for information, and Larkin arranged to have it broadcast, along with the still shot from the newspaper and the video taken that morning, on the six and eleven o'clock news programs.

They went back to Willoughby Mall in the chief's car. The entrance from State Route 85 had been opened and the last fire engine had left, but there was still an unusual amount of congestion around the south end of the parking lot. The coffeeshop was again open to the public. The Public Safety Department had set up twenty-four hour security around the burned building.

Auburn went home, showered, put on his oldest clothes, and drove back to the mall. Kestrel and an electrician were there waiting for him. Except for a pause of twenty minutes to grab dinner at the coffeeshop, they worked steadily until after ten o'clock that night.

Next morning when Auburn reported to headquarters he found background checks on the dead woman and the people he'd inter-

viewed yesterday. Sarah Martindale was sole proprietor of Queen-dome Press and a woman of considerable wealth, with heavy financial interests in several other local businesses. Preliminary information on the publishing company indicated that it was a thriving concern with enormous gross annual sales. Sarah Martindale had been thrice married and thrice divorced.

Cavanaca had started The Word "GO!" on a shoestring and it was indeed now a multimillion dollar operation, with two smaller satellite stores in the suburbs, but cash flow was tight. He'd once been convicted of fencing merchandise from a hijacked truck but got off with a fine. Godsey, the franchisee of Kankun Natural Tan, had a shady past involving drugs and rackets. The surviving members of Queendom Press had clean slates. Sam Walker held a master's degree in English, and besides her work for Queendom, she taught literature and English composition part-time at a local community college. Bannister had degrees in theater and computer science.

Before lunch Auburn was back at the mall. Steering clear of the scene of the fire, he visited a hardware store, an auto supply store, and a general discount store, all within Willoughby Mall, before hitting the road on a systematic round of similar stores in the area.

When he got back to headquarters, it was two o'clock in the afternoon. Stamaty from the coroner's office ran him down in the canteen.

The autopsy on Sarah Martindale had shown that death was due



to a blunt head injury with resulting cerebral hemorrhage, not to smoke inhalation. Since blood taken from the left ventricle of the heart showed no carbon monoxide, death must have occurred before the fire started. How long before couldn't be reliably determined.

"Tell me something, Stamaty," said Auburn over the last of his lemon custard cup. "Why are clerks in car parts outlets always such punks? Is it some kind of a rule of nature?"

Stamaty had been working on a master's degree in psychology for years but kept getting sidetracked in fields like ESP and UFO's, witchcraft and the occult. "Only when the customer is wearing a tie," he announced dogmatically.

Back in the office Auburn found that the broadcast picture of the bearded firefighter had elicited one promising response. A woman who chose to remain anonymous had called in and identified him as a man who worked as a landscaper near her home. She didn't know his name, but she did give the name of the company he worked for. Since the police phones were equipped to identify the origin of each incoming call, a tentative I.D. and a positive address for the caller were available. Auburn went back on the road.

Mrs. Deborah Culley was a large, voluble woman who looked as if she dreamed in black and white, saved grocery bags by the hundreds, and read obituaries for excitement. At first she tried to deny that she'd made the call, but Auburn had listened to the tape and he wasn't buying any.

"I don't want any trouble with him," she fussed. "I've already complained twice about him playing his radio far too loud while he was working out there in my neighbor's yard before eight o'clock in the morning."

"Who did you complain to?"

"My neighbor."

"How sure are you that the man you saw on TV is your neighbor's gardener?"

"I didn't see it on TV. It's in the morning paper." She pulled the paper out from underneath her on the couch and showed Auburn the public notice that he hadn't yet seen himself. "That's him. You couldn't miss him with all that hair and that beard. He looks like some kind of degenerate."

Without asking her to define this term, Auburn got the name of the landscaping service that employed the suspect, thanked her, and took his leave.

He slipped into the nearest store with a pay phone and tried to call the company but got an answering machine. He elected not to leave a message. Walking slowly back through the store to savor the air-conditioning, he passed the book section, where a row of paperback romances published by Queendom Press caught his eye.

He paused to look over the lurid, stereotyped covers and moronic titles. A salesperson in a red smock with a name tag that read DESIREE was putting out more books from a cart. "Can't keep the racks full," she grumbled affably. "They sell faster than chocolate. Looking for a gift?"

"Semi."

"What age?"

"Ma'am?"

"How old is she? The Queendom romances go by age group, you know. The Rosebud series is for kids in junior high. Blossom Time is for senior high and college girls, Surrender for women in their twenties and thirties, and Stella for the mature reader." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Over forty."

Auburn shook his head in silent bewilderment.

"Off-target, huh? Well, I don't suppose, if she's somebody you care about, you'd be buying her anything in the Clytemnestra series. Remember your mythology? Male-bashing, all pretty much overdone if you ask me. Of course, the most popular books of all are the ones in the Moonglow series. Romaine Boucicault writes most of those. I know you've heard of her!"

He had. Among the Boucicault titles, one romance stood out like a beacon. It was called *Flashpoint*, and its cover featured a gaudy picture of a house in flames. He read the blurb on the back and the first ten lines of Chapter One and headed for the checkout lane.

Instead of wasting time on a telephone chase, he drove to the business address of Golomin's Nursery and Landscaping on the south edge of town. The office clerk identified the bearded man in Auburn's picture as an employee of the company, though not as positively as Mrs. Culley had. The man's name was Claude Sager. He worked only part-time as a landscaper, had a full-time night job somewhere, was moody and reclusive.

Auburn's first knock at Sager's house met with silence, his further ones with blasphemy. "Go bother somebody else," Sager bellowed lustily from behind the closed door. "I work nights."

"Police officer, Mr. Sager. Open up, please."

He tensed a little as the door opened a mere crack and the crack slowly widened. He held his badge up with his left hand, his right one gripping the porch rail in case he needed to become a moving target. His first glance at the sleepy, bathrobed figure in the dark hallway didn't convince him he had the man in the picture. Then he saw the fire helmet on the kitchen floor.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a couple of minutes. I think I saw your picture in the morning paper."

Sager became utterly docile. He admitted Auburn to the stuffy, dimly lit apartment, helped himself to a beer, and offered Auburn one.

"What about it, Mr. Sager? Were you at the fire at Willoughby Mall the night before last?"

"Just standing by to help out any way I could." Sager took a long draft of beer, and Auburn noticed that there was something wrong with his mouth.

"But you're not with the Fire and Rescue Department?"

"Not officially. Not at present. But I'm a trained firefighter and paramedic. I'd had more than ten years' experience on the fire brigade in Wilmot when I got this." He pulled his beard aside to show a deforming scar involving the lower half of his face.

"How'd that happen?"

"Drum of solvent blew up in my face in a factory fire three years ago last Christmas Eve. I spent seven weeks in the hospital. When I got out, I looked like something in a horror movie." He spoke matter-of-factly, without emotion. "My girl disappeared, and when I walked down the street, kids screamed. If I hadn't grown this beard, I'd have to buy my groceries over the Internet."

"But with the beard you can't work as a firefighter any more, can you?" said Auburn.

Sager put down his beer can empty. "Correction. Under state law I can't be employed by a fire department, even as a volunteer. That doesn't mean I can't turn up at a fire and put my skill and experience at the service of the public."

"You go to a lot of fires?"

"Only at night. I work the graveyard shift at Quintilian Corporation. Parts expeditor. I keep a police radio on my bench. When there's a fire call within five or six miles of the factory, I clock out."

"Is that what happened the other night? You heard about the Willoughby Mall fire on the police band and then clocked out?"

"Yes, sir. Got two witnesses. Security guard and the time clock. In case you were thinking maybe you'd nabbed yourself a pyromaniac."

After dinner that evening Auburn spent two hours wading through the opening chapters of *Flashpoint* by Romaine Boucicault. He found the book to be seedy, sentimental claptrap, but just when he was about to hurl it across the

room in disgust, he came to a passage that riveted his attention.

In a climactic scene a rejected suitor set fire to the heroine's house. Not only was the method he chose similar to the one Auburn thought had been used at Willoughby Mall, but the technical information on that method supplied by the author had a strikingly familiar ring. He pulled out his textbooks and notes from the arson course and went to work.

By the time stores started opening in the morning, he was back on the road with the yellow pages and a city directory open on the passenger seat next to him. As had happened so many times before, dogged persistence paid off in the end. Arriving at headquarters around noon, he decided to postpone lunch until he'd done some preliminary searching on the computer, but the preliminaries took him until a quarter past two. He went to the canteen and celebrated his progress with petrified Salisbury steak, a stale roll, and an orange that had had a rough winter.

In twenty minutes he was back at the computer. About four o'clock he had a phone conference with Chief Larkin and then went to the forensic lab on the top floor to get some glossy prints from Kestrel. As he headed once again for Willoughby Mall, he was getting that funny feeling in the chest, like going over the top on a Ferris wheel, that always went with wrapping up a case and making an arrest.

Although there were still security personnel on the scene, Larkin had granted Cavanaca and his ten-

ants access to the burned building. The Word "GO!" was swarming with cleanup and repair workers, and the GRAND REOPENING and FIRE SALE signs were already up in the windows, even though the store wouldn't be open again to the public for several days.

The electricity was back on in the building, but the air conditioning wasn't. Auburn had no trouble finding Cavanaca, who was supervising a team of cleaners and brandishing a yardstick like a whip. When the store owner understood what he was after, he led Auburn personally to the footwear department and showed him the relevant merchandise.

Upstairs, in the offices of Queen-don Press, Auburn found Sam Walker and Geoff Bannister carrying out a more or less hopeless salvage operation. Although they had the stairway door blocked open and a big portable fan running in the lobby, the atmosphere was steamy inside, and heat seemed to flow down like a river from the attic space through the gap in the ceiling. With the fluorescent lights on, it looked even more of a disaster than when Auburn had seen it last.

Ms. Walker glanced up from a computer terminal that had suffered its last glitch. "Hi, Sergeant Auburn. Is this a social call?"

"Semi." No use being rude to somebody who remembers your name and rank with perfect accuracy. "I was wondering if you could tell me how I can get in touch with Romaine Boucicault?"

Bannister dissolved in noisy laughter.

"You're looking at her," said Ms. Walker. "Two-thirds of her."

"She doesn't exist," Bannister assured him. "The truth is, Ophelia Rountree and all the rest of our authors are just as chimerical as any of their characters."

"Just as which?"

"Look around you, sergeant. You are in a factory. The ruins of one, anyway. Within these four walls, Sam and Sarah and I manufactured every one of those books you see out there in the lobby. Precision-crafted them in cold blood. Each one has exactly sixty-seven thousand words on exactly one hundred ninety-six pages. And with Sarah setting the pace, we've been turning one out every three or four days for the past six months."

Auburn took off his jacket, tested the seat of a chair for soot, and sat down on it. "Tell me some more about the romance business," he said.

"What do you want to know?" asked Bannister. "We work up a plot for each novel around one of four skeletons—"

"Four skeletons," repeated Auburn with arched eyebrows.

"Figure of speech. Say four scenarios." Bannister shoved some debris aside and sat on a desk. "First we work out the basic narrative sequence and the *dramatis personae*. Then we insert blocks of material at strategic points to establish setting and character, introduce subplots, provide comic relief, appeal to nobler sentiments—"

"And inject padding," added Sam Walker. "Do cops enforce federal copyright laws?"



"Not if they can help it. Why?"

"Because three people couldn't put out two books a week for months on end without borrowing a lot of material. Some of the stuff we use is—let's say 'recycled' from other novels. Sarah used to buy up old books from interior decorators. They sell them by the yard, you know. Stuff nobody's read in the past fifty years. We'd scan them into our mainframe with that gadget over there and then parcel them up into blocks of text and sort them by content. Did you ever hear of Dorothy Quentin Constable?"

He couldn't tell from her facial expression how seriously to take the question. "Is that another one of your mythical writers?"

"No, she was real. She wrote more than a hundred and fifty novels. But since she used a pen and worked up her stuff from scratch, each book took her three months to write instead of three days. And she'd never heard of television, let alone inline skates or cellular phones or frozen yogurt, so we have to do a lot of updating. Even so, her books have been a gold mine." With the toe of her shoe she reverently touched the charred heap of books Auburn had noticed on his first visit to the office. "Here's all that's left of Dorothy."

"I don't see how you could do that without eventually getting caught."

"That's where Sarah's genius came in. With a computer you can instantly change personal and place names wherever they appear in a chunk of text. You can also substitute key words and phrases, cut and paste to alter the flow of ideas,

and inject extraneous passages. Give us a couple of hours and we'll turn your favorite Bible story into a steamy romance set in seventeenth century France."

"Or at the 1960 Olympics," suggested Bannister. "Or on one of the moons of Jupiter."

"We get massive chunks of material off the Internet," she continued. "Say we want to set a story in Helsinki or Vienna or Skokie, Illinois. In the twinkling of a kilobyte, we can download page after page of gorgeous local color from chambers of commerce, travel agencies, real estate agencies, development companies . . . it's so easy we'd be crazy not to do it. They even teach it to kids in school nowadays. My little niece in fifth grade can whip up a composition from stuff off the Web and the online information services without contributing one word, let alone one thought, of her own."

Auburn sat shaking his head. "So Romaine was just—"

"A figment," said Sam Walker. "And her future looks pretty grim. All our equipment is wrecked, not to mention the stuff that was stored in it. What was your interest in her, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Just an odd coincidence. A character in one of her books started a fire just like the one you had here by dumping a can of ether into a machine with a defective relay that threw sparks."

"Flashpoint," nodded Bannister. "I remember that one. But where's the coincidence? This fire was an accident."

"Was it? Out in the trash container behind the building I found four

bottles that had contained a gas-line de-icing fluid with ether in it. There's a circular patch on the floor there in the storeroom, right under the rooftop fan, where something dripped down and ate the finish off the vinyl tile.

"Not only that, but *Flashpoint* contains passages describing the explosive and flammable properties of ether that were lifted right out of a standard textbook on toxic and hazardous materials. One of those passages even retained a misprint that appears in the book's definition of the word 'flashpoint'—the lowest temperature at which a flammable vapor will ignite. And now I think I can see why."

"Romaine gets a little careless at times," admitted Ms. Walker with a sheepish nod. "About this gas-line de-icer . . ."

"Well," said Auburn, "it's not the kind of thing most people buy in June. I figured if I asked around enough places I might find a salesperson somewhere who remembered selling four bottles of it recently to one customer."

Bannister got up and started chasing a fly with a folded magazine. "Yes? And? The suspense is killing us."

"And I did. Not only that, but the purchaser used a credit card."

"Pretty dumb if he were planning to start a fire with the stuff," said Sam.

"Most criminals have a streak of arrogance. They think they're smarter than the law, and they get sloppy. This one completely blew it. Because the police can play with computers, too. We've got open ac-

counts with a couple of dozen agencies that supply information for a price. Not glowing descriptions of Skokie, Illinois, but who spends how much on what and who makes long-distance telephone calls to who."

"Whom," said Bannister. He missed the fly again.

"Whoever. The purchaser of the de-icing chemical also recently bought a pair of running shoes right downstairs at The Word *"GO!"* using the same credit card. I just matched up the sole pattern of a pair of shoes of the same brand, style number, and size with a photograph taken by a police evidence technician forty-eight hours ago up on the roof, near the top of the iron ladder attached to the back of the building. This time of year, the tar up there probably stays just about the right consistency all night to take an impression from the sole of a shoe."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Bannister.

"The shoes that left those impressions probably still have traces of tar on the soles," continued Auburn, "and maybe some of the rust from the rungs of the ladder ground in to the insteps. I'd even bet those shoes are in this room right now. On the feet of a morning person. A very early—"

"He's got me dead to rights, Sam, blast his giblets!" Bannister hurled the magazine at Auburn's head and sprang through the door to the lobby.

Seconds later he reappeared in the company of Patrolman Fritz Dollinger, a man who had spent

years trying to convince his superiors that most of his vast bulk was muscle and not fat. At the moment, Bannister didn't seem to have any trouble believing it.

After formally arresting Bannister for the murder of Sarah Martindale and for setting the fire that had damaged the building and its contents, Auburn read him his rights.

Sam Walker was beside herself. "This is insanity. Why, Geoff, why?"

"I'll tell you why, Ms. Walker," said Auburn. "Greed. You said yourself that your late boss worked you to death and kept most of the profits from the books for herself. Bannister wanted to put Queendom Press out of commission and steal all the files from the computers so he could set up in business for himself somewhere else."

"How could he do that?"

Bannister, silent for once, stood scowling in chagrin under Dolinger's tranquil vigilance.

"Two months ago he bought a deluxe home computer with a humongous memory and subscribed to an online service. Since then I imagine he's been slipping in here nights and gradually e-mailing himself the entire contents of Queendom's mainframe. I suspect that any of these computers that weren't completely ruined by heat or smoke or water have had their memories manually drained. And I think we'll find all the missing

megabytes safely stored on Bannister's home computer."

"But what about Sarah?"

"His lawyer will probably advise him to say she caught him red-handed the other night and in the excitement of the moment he hit her harder than he meant to. To which the city prosecutor will probably reply that he must have been planning to stage the fire at least three weeks ago, when he bought the chemical. After killing Ms. Martindale he removed the trapdoor from the entrance to the attic crawlspace and piled up the collected works of Dorothy Something Somebody on the floor underneath.

"Then he closed up the office, got the bottles of chemical out of his car, climbed the ladder on the back of the building, and poured the stuff down through the rooftop fan. Maybe he hid over there in the culvert behind those trees along the highway until he heard the boom. He had a couple of bottles in reserve; he bought six. Please feel free to add or subtract details, Mr. Bannister."

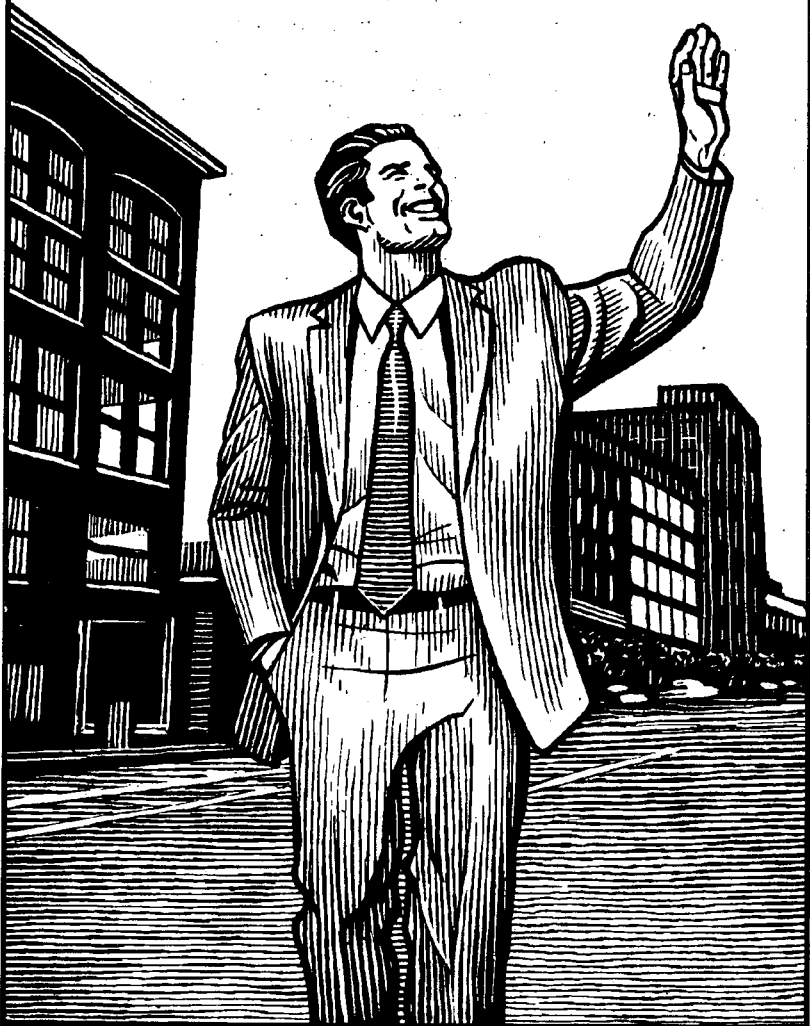
"I wouldn't dream of it," said Bannister with something like his former flamboyance. "You as much as told me to keep my mouth shut, and I'm taking your advice. You're going to have to prove every bit of this in court—if you can."

"But I do have just one comment, officer. I think you've been reading too much cheap fiction lately."

FICTION

# TROUBLEMAKER

Edmund X. DeJesus



*Illustration by Dan Krovatin*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/02*

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Carl woke at dawn, stretched, and turned off his radio-jamming machine. It was his own invention. All through the night it transmitted a powerful signal of static that made radio communication impossible for miles around. It was really quite clever, actively seeking real radio sources to tune in and block. No one could trace it to Carl's apartment, either.

When Carl's neighbors complained about the strange static that interfered with their radio listening, he would nod and claim that it bothered him, too. Then he would suggest that it might be a government project of some kind. That usually ended the conversation.

He dressed and left his building. He had a busy day planned today. His first stop was the market on the corner.

The shopkeeper smiled at Carl, and he smiled back at her. He was the kind of customer she liked. Always well dressed. Plenty of money for even the most expensive items. Didn't bother her for help with finding anything. And never complained about shortages.

As Carl perused the shelves, he didn't notice any shortages at first. Ah, butter. There were only two packages left. He took them both. And only one box of a popular cereal. He took that, too.

He paid for his purchases and chatted about the weather while the shopkeeper wrapped everything neatly for him. He thanked her, and they exchanged smiles again before he left. He walked around the corner and threw everything away.

He checked his watch. Plenty of time to stop by the coffeeshop. He was pleased to notice a large truck parked outside. He glanced into the back of the truck, gave a minute nod, and entered the shop.

He smiled at the waitress and ordered a strudel to take with him. The waitress liked Carl also. He always took his pastry away, so there was nothing to clean up. And he even gave her a small gratuity, just as if he'd eaten it there. "Best strudel in town," Carl told the truck driver drinking coffee at the counter. "You must try it." And Carl bought the truck driver a strudel. The truck driver thanked him. Carl smiled at him, thanked the waitress, and left the shop.

That should delay him a bit longer, thought Carl. He walked to the front of the truck, out of sight of the shop, and opened the hood. He made an adjustment that took only seconds and closed the hood again. The truck would run for a while, then break down. It would be a puzzling problem for a mechanic to fix. Carl dropped the strudel into a trash bin. He hated strudel.

He was whistling as he mounted the steps to the large government building. Few people were at work this early. At the small stand, he bought a flower. The old woman who ran the stand liked this young man. So handsome. So well mannered. And not many stopped to buy flowers these days. She arranged the blossom in his buttonhole. He thanked her with a smile and walked to the stairs.

Carl didn't work in the building. Carl didn't really have a job, not really. While most of the many workers in the large government building walked up the stairs, Carl walked down them to the basement.

He passed down a long corridor and opened a door at the far end. It was noisy inside from all the machinery. No one was there.

Carl found the main electrical junction box, then followed the large power cables that led from the outside. He found a place where they were scarcely visible, hidden in the shadows near the ceiling. He pulled a crate over so he could reach the cables.

From his pocket he took a small bottle of acid. He unscrewed it carefully and used the dropper inside to drip the caustic liquid onto one of the main power cables. The acid hissed as it chewed through the insulation and the metal within. Carl stopped when there was just a slender whisker of wire remaining.

When everyone was at work later in the day, they would use a lot of electricity. This would heat up the wire and it would snap. All the power to the large government building would be lost. When they investigated the cause, they would find a badly corroded power cable.

He got down from the crate, and carefully poured the rest of the bottle of acid along the top of one of the furnaces. No doubt it would have its effect one day.

Carl left by the rear entrance. He had to walk quickly to reach the train station on time. He bought his ticket for the train on track 6. Another train was preparing to leave on track 2.

Carl studied the posters of wanted criminals that were displayed on the wall of the train station. Then he went to a public telephone, put in a coin, and called the police station. He described one of the wanted criminals in great detail, and said that he had just seen the man board the train on track 2.

He waited a few minutes. While he waited, he dropped something into the coin slot of the public telephone. It looked like a coin, but was actually another of Carl's little inventions. Once inside the telephone, it would pop open with a coiled spring, piercing parts of the mechanism. The telephone would not work again.

Carl boarded his train. As it left the station, he noted with satisfaction that the police had arrived, had stopped the train on track 2, and were beginning to search it. It was a long train.

His train trip was very enjoyable. He hardly ever got to leave the city these days. The countryside was lovely this time of year.

It took well over an hour to reach the little station. Before he left the train, he placed a small stink bomb on the underside of his seat. It would go off in about twenty minutes, rendering that car of the train unusable.

On the platform of the little station, he bought his return ticket and mailed the letter in his pocket. The letter appeared to come from the exclusive military school for boys located in the same town as the station.

Carl had written the letter himself, however. It was addressed to the parents of a boy at the school and told how his poor grades and questionable behavior made it necessary to consider his expulsion. It set a date and time for the parents to visit the school and meet with the headmaster.

Carl's train arrived on time, and he returned to the city. He spent the rest of the afternoon visiting several tall buildings. On the roof of each building were powerful searchlights that would play about the sky at night. He scattered packages of bird seed around and on the large lights. Soon birds would come to eat the seed and foul the searchlights with their droppings.

When it was dinnertime, he was hungry after his long day. He chose a busy restaurant that was popular with servicemen on leave because it was cheap and the food came fast. He ate a full dinner, including the soup. Before he left, he broke a small glass vial in the coatroom. The vial contained a concentrated strain of influenza. Within days, many of the customers of the restaurant would be sick.

Back at his apartment Carl read for a while, then prepared for bed. He gazed out his window for a long time. He had an excellent view of the building across the street, swathed in the blood-red banner with the black swastika.

He thought for a few moments about his day. Food shortages. Vital aircraft parts delayed. An entire ministry plunged into darkness and inactivity. Their precious train schedules thrown off. Another public telephone out of service. An important colonel called home. Anti aircraft searchlights blinded. Soldiers spreading sickness among their units.

He smelled the small flower he had left on his dresser. It had been a good day. He yawned, turned on his radio jammer, and went to bed.

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FICTION

# Photoplay

Herbert Cohen

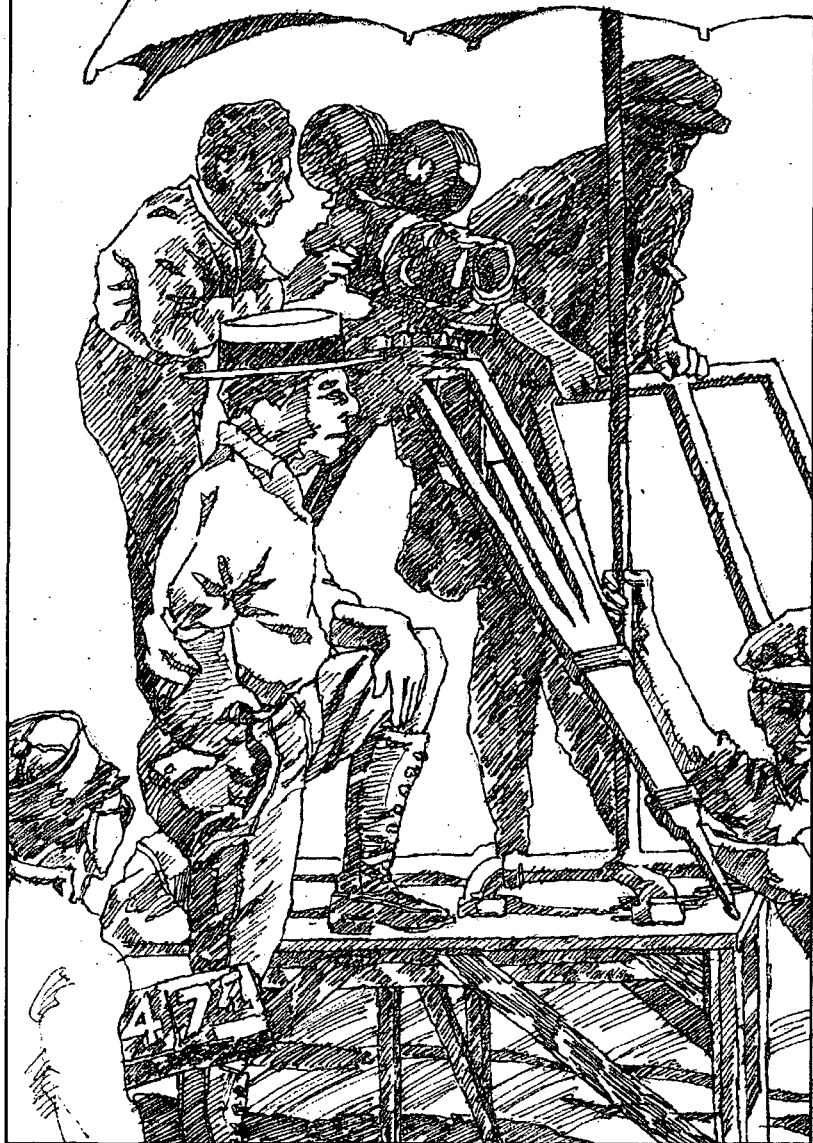


Illustration by Meredith Lighbown

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/02

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**“Y**ou bring it? You bring the bottle? Hey! it's only a pint. I thought I said . . . okay, okay. Look! Ah, could ya open it for me? My hands don't work so good. Good God, man, don't! Not a glass. Nurse smells liquor in a glass, she'll start asking questions. Gimme here. One good swig's all I need.

*“Aaah—whew!—that's better. You know what the trouble with the human race is, don't ya? It was born two drinks under par, and it never caught up. Those bastard doctors say I'm too old to drink. Hell! I'm too old not to.*

*“Now, what do you want? Speak up, I don't hear too good any more. Come to think of it, at my age it's amazing I can hear at all. I'm a hundred and five years old; can you believe it?*

*“Soo, ya want to hear about D. W. Griffith? You one of those goddamn film historians or something? Hell, back then it was a business, now it's a goddamn archaeological dig. Ya don't wanta hear about my years with Warner Brothers, do ya; me and Mike Curtiz, we ruled the roost for forty years. We directed all the best pictures. I did most of the Cagneys and Flynns.*

*“What? Hold it! Don't ask me about that! Look, I told you not to ask about that. Hey, wait! Leave the bottle. Okay, yah, okay, it's true. I stole John Barrymore's body out of the mortuary and sat it up in Errol Flynn's living room. Yeah, yeah, we put a drink and a cigarette in his hand. Hee-hee, scared the bejesus out of old Errol, but he took it like a sport and we all had one last drink*

*with The Great Profile. Old Jack would have loved that gag.*

*“Now! What was that question you asked? Oh yeah, Griffith's 1912 trip to Hollywood. Let's see, I was seventeen that year. Yeah, it was in the fall, late October. That's the first time I ever saw them.”*

Our family ranch was forty miles west of Las Cruces. We ran mostly longhorns because they could stand the heat. I was dogging strays that morning out in the east canyons. Midday, the steers liked to hunt shade down in the gullies and fissures along the canyon walls. Some of the fissures were so wide and long you could ride right through them to the next canyon.

There were no strays in the canyon I was working, so I decided to take a shortcut through a fissure into the next canyon. I was halfway through it when I heard this shouting and a woman's scream. I raced down the fissure, and as I turned sharp right, I could see just a small piece of the next canyon—a young girl and this guy were fighting. He pushed her away and reared back with a whip in his hand; the bastard was getting ready to lash her. Luckily his back was to me.

Old Wilbur was a trained cattle pony, and just a touch of my heel in the right place sent him flying. I caught the guy before his arm came forward, so when I dived off Wilbur, I hit him like a rockslide. He was on the ground and I was on top of him and I was just about to punch him silly when something lifted me into the air, spun me around, and set



me down on my feet as easily as flipping a coin.

There, standing in front of me, was this short, stout guy dressed only in jodhpurs and laced boots. From the waist up, his chest and arms were plated with muscle, and there wasn't a hair on him. Not even on his head. His bull neck held a round, evil face with pointy ears and a shaved head. "So," he said with a cynical smile, "enter hero, stage left." His accent was slightly foreign, but his English was letter-perfect.

Then everybody laughed. The guy I knocked down dusted himself off and laughed. The girl he was whipping was bent over double, giggling. Suddenly I was aware of a crowd of people behind me, all laughing in a nice sorta friendly way.

There was a big beach umbrella planted in the sand to shade this funny looking machine thing on sticks. A tiny man in a business suit stood behind it, cranking a little handle on the side. Alongside him a tall, lean man wearing a homburg sat sprawled in a camp chair staring down at everybody. Off in the distance I could see two big Packard touring cars and behind them two buckboards and a herd of horses penned in an Indian corral made of briar bushes.

When the laughter stopped, the crowd all turned to the man in the homburg. His handsome-actor's face scowled as he strode over to me with a long, deliberate gait. "Do know you just ruined the shot?"

He had a distinctive Southern slur to his words. I didn't say any-

thing. "*Do you?*" he demanded. When he didn't get an answer, he exploded. "Get off the damn set," he screamed. "Get out of here, you sonuvabitch!"

I walked over to Wilbur and drew my Winchester from its scabbard. "Listen to me, mister. Around here you call a man a son of a bitch and you better back it up with fists or cartridges." I cradled the rifle in the crook of my arm but let it point at the tall man.

The bald guy who had picked me up deliberately walked into the line of fire. "Easy, young sir. Mr. Griffith has been known to get excited and say things in the heat of the moment he really doesn't mean. Now, let's talk about this for a minute." His face looked serious, but there was a hint of a smile in his eyes as if this were all an interesting little joke.

I took an instant liking to him, but I wasn't about to back down now. Besides, I wanted to rattle Mr. Homburg a bit, so I cocked the rifle. Baldy leaped out of the way as nimble as a dancer, but the tall one just stood there studying me. I gave him my best screw-you grin, swung the Winchester skyward and let off four rounds nice and slow without taking my eyes off Griffith. Shots like that can be heard for five miles on a calm day. The tall one and me were eye-locked, and I could see he wasn't about to back down either.

From far off came the sound of a single acknowledging shot. I let my rifle drop back on the tall man again.

"In the first place, mister," I said, "you're on Walsh property. In five

minutes my father and four other armed men are coming over that ridge to help you leave. If I were you, I'd start packing."

The tall one turned to Baldy.

"Erich, you told me this is government land."

"That's what the wrangler said when we scouted locations." Erich turned to the knot of people looking on.

"Wrangler!" he shouted. "Where's the wrangler?"

The knot parted, and there was old Ellsworth Crutchly peering out at us. Ellsworth had been hanging around Las Cruces since I was a pup. He was reputed to be a good wrangler when he was sober. Trouble was, nobody'd ever seen him sober. "Goddamn, Ellsworth!" I shouted. "Come on over here."

He reluctantly walked toward me, and everybody could see he was drunk. "Ellsworth, who owns this land," I asked.

"This is Sliver Canyon, Ralph. It's, ah, government land."

"You gotta be a little patient with Ellsworth," I told Erich. "Especially when he's drunk. Ellsworth, listen, Sliver Canyon is two miles to the east. See up there on top of that ridge. See the fenceposts; you, me, and my paw put them in two years ago. Remember how we had a hell of a time getting the wagon up that trail?"

"Damned if you ain't right, Ralph. Jesus! All these canyons look alike. Sorry about the trouble, but hell, what difference does it make."

"The difference is," Erich explained, "that we now have to move

everything, set up somewhere else, and lose a day's production. That will cost the company two thousand dollars."

Griffith took off his hat. Eyes still fastened on me, he turned to the knot of people. "Everybody! Come in close." When they'd all crowded around him, he turned back to me with a friendly grin. "Sir, I'd like to make a public apology to you in front of everyone here for saying what I did. It was done in a fit of frustration and anger because my work was interrupted." Then he gave me his most charming smile. "And young man, since this is obviously your land, you had a perfect right to interrupt us. I sincerely apologize for my boorish behavior."

I lowered my rifle. You can't help admiring a guy who can do that. Didn't think I'd like him much, but I did admire him.

We all heard the hoofbeats as Pa crested the hill with his foreman and three hands, each one carrying a Winchester in his saddle boot. My dad stopped for a second to scan the situation, then spotted me and rode over. "Who are these people, Ralph?"

"I don't know. Just found them here," I said. "Seems Ellsworth Crutchly thought it was government land. He's their wrangler."

"Excuse me, sir," Griffith stepped forward. "You're the owner of this ranch?"

"I am."

"My name is Griffith, sir, D. W. Griffith. This is my company of players. We film photoplays for the Biograph Studios in New York."

"Will Walsh; this is my spread. What kinda plays you make?"

"Photoplays—for the nickelodeons."

"You the fellers who make those things?"

Griffith gave him a deprecating smile. "Someone has to."

He got a small, polite smile from my pa that seemed to encourage him. "Look, sir, it would cost us quite a bit of money and time if we had to leave your land and relocate just now."

"What about the money it's costing me to run out here with four men when my son signals there's trouble on the land?"

Griffith lit a cigar and nodded sympathetically. "You're right, Mr. Walsh, and I intend to compensate you for any inconvenience."

My father crossed his arms and studied Griffith for a moment, then leaned his elbow on his saddle horn. "Here's the deal: twenty dollars a day to fool around out here, and you clean up your own mess. You take Ralph on as a hired hand, he gets two dollars a day. Don't worry, he's a hard worker and he'll give you your money's worth. He's also here to keep an eye on you."

Griffith took out his wallet and extracted three twenty dollar gold pieces, and a ten dollar note. He held them in the palm of his hand. "We'll be gone the day after tomorrow."

Pa looked at the money, then at Griffith. "Done!" he said as he scooped up the cash. He turned to me. "Stay with them every minute, son. I'll have someone bring you a bedroll and clean socks."

"Okay, Pa."

"Oh, one more thing, Mr. Walsh. You may hear gunfire occasionally. We shoot blanks when we stage Indian attacks and such."

Pa nodded and signaled his men to ride out. As they cleared the ridge, Griffith turned to Crutchly and pinned him with his cold green eyes. "You just cost me seventy dollars. You're fired!"

"Hey! Wait a minute! You said fifteen bucks for three days' work. All I seed is five dollars down. Now gimme the rest of my money!" His hand went out.

Griffith was furious. "Don't you dare make demands on me!" He hit Crutchly a clean punch in the mouth, and Crutchly went down on his back. "You're not worth the five dollar advance," Griffith hissed. "Now, get out of here!"

Crutchly slowly rose to his feet. "You damn rebel bastard," he roared as his hand went for his gun.

Erich suddenly appeared at the wrangler's side; he flipped Crutchly's gun out of its holster before Ellsworth could touch it. Then he tossed it in the air, caught it, and threw it to me.

"Look, Mr. Crutchly," Erich spoke soothingly. "Let's try to be reasonable. We paid you five dollars in advance. Here's another five for today." He slid a bill into Crutchly's shirt pocket. "Now, that's ten dollars for two days' work, not bad. Ralph here will give you your gun back in a day or two, won't you, Ralph?"

He started to lead Crutchly toward the corral. Ellsworth reluctantly followed him for a few steps,

then stopped and stared back at Griffith. "You just *think* this is over, you bastard," he said before he went after Erich.

When Erich returned, he gave Griffith a sad shake of his head. "Two guns pointed at you in twenty minutes. I think that's a record, D. W."

Griffith suddenly laughed. "I told you this was a tough business. Okay, let's break for lunch."

We all trooped into the lunch tent, where three long tables were set, two for the crew and one for Griffith and his actors. Erich pointed to a seat next to him at Griffith's table. "Sit with us."

Griffith was seated at the head of the table. On his right was Erich, on his left sat the little cameraman in the business suit. Erich introduced him to me as Billy Blitzer.

I noticed that Griffith's table was different from the others. It had a linen tablecloth, and each seat had a napkin, a water glass, and a wine glass whereas the other tables had pitchers of beer and plates of sandwiches.

The crew tied into the sandwiches and beer, soon poured into foam-laden glasses.

At the same time, a waiter in a white coat handed Griffith a wine bottle for his approval. D. W. nodded, and the waiter opened it and went around the table filling each one's glass.

"Here's to my hero," someone said behind me. I turned to see the young girl I'd saved sit down and raise her glass in a toast. She was dark and very pretty, and I started to blush.

"He *blushed!*" she said in astonishment. "He really blushed! How sweet."

The girl next to her appraised me. She was not exactly pretty, but her prominent cheekbones and large cat's eyes gave her an unmistakable presence. "Billy," she said, turning to Blitzer, "what do you think? Would the camera like him?"

"Not as a hero, no." Billy said. "He's not the romantic type." He suddenly reached out and tilted my jaw, which made me pull back scowling. "See!" Blitzer cried, enjoying the rise he'd got out of me. "See that scowl? He'd make a great villain."

"Oh, stop it, Billy," the girl said, amused. "We shouldn't tease the man; we've given him enough trouble today." She held out her hand. "I'm Lillian Gish, one of the players. This hussy you rescued this morning is Mae Marsh, another thespian, and that accursed fiend who wanted to turn her into whipped cream is Lionel Barrymore."

"I thought you looked familiar, I saw you do *Hamlet*," I said. "It was last year in San Francisco. I really enjoyed it, sir."

Barrymore smiled appreciatively. "Oh yes, the old Geary Theater, the only theater left standing after the quake. Glad you enjoyed it, Ralph; actually, John, my brother, is a much better Hamlet than I am."

"He's the handsomest man in the world," Mae Marsh declared, her eyes aglow. "A toast to John Barrymore, who can put his shoes under my bed anytime." She raised her glass, and the ruby red liquid sparkled for a instant before the

glass shattered and a great black furrow streaked across the table toward Griffith. It stopped before his water glass. I looked up and saw a bullet hole in the top of the tent.

Erich was on his feet before anyone else could move. "Ralph, where is your rifle?"

"With my saddle, near the corral."

He grabbed my arm, dragging me to my feet as he ran out of the tent. The second shot rang out, and a clump of dirt exploded next to his foot. He sprinted to the corral, and I followed at his heels. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Ellsworth with a Remington in his hand standing on a bluff overlooking our camp.

"I told you I'd be back!" Crutchly shouted.

Another shot missed Erich as he grabbed my Winchester from its boot and vaulted onto my horse bareback. Then he did something I'd never seen before. He sat cross-legged on Wilbur's broad flank to steady himself and fired before Crutchly could jack in another round. Ellsworth, slammed against the rock wall behind him, clutched his arm, blood seeping between his fingers. "I'll get you all," he screamed and ran behind the bluff. Erich touched Wilbur's flanks, and the horse jumped the briar fence at a gallop as they made off through the notch for the other side of the bluff.

D. W. and two other men were outside the tent, all carrying pistols.

"Was that Crutchly?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Erich went after him. He's some rider."

D. W. smiled. "As you saw, he's a damn good man in a pinch. He was an officer in the Austrian cavalry." He turned. "Ramon! George! Up on those bluffs and do a four hour watch."

Ramon pocketed his pistol and grinned. "Just like the syndicate days, huh, D. W.?"

"I hope not." D. W. said. He affectionately tousled Ramon's hair. He glanced at me. "Well, do you like making photoplays?"

"Seems your life is more exciting than your pictures."

D. W. slapped my back hard and roared with laughter. "Well, since we've had to shoot our wrangler, you're taking over. Saddle up four horses; we're filming the chase scene." He studied me for a moment. "Billy's right, you'll make a good villain. Yes, you'll be the bandit chief." He suddenly stuck his head into the lunch tent. Clapping his hands sharply, he shouted, "Everybody out! Lunch is over. We're wasting sunlight."

By the time the camera was set up for the first take, Erich was back. He told D. W., "I lost him in the canyons behind the bluff, but he'll have trouble lifting a rifle after this." He dismounted and handed me the reins. "She's a beautiful animal, Ralph, but your Winchester is a bit off. About six inches to the left at one hundred meters. You should realign the sight."

"Enough," D. W. commanded, "We've been through the syndicate wars, so one lone saddle bum can't scare us. He's probably headed for town to get his arm fixed and get drunk. I want to shoot the chase



scene with Ralph as the bandit chief. Erich, show him what he needs to do." He went off to line up the camera positions for the afternoon shoots.

"Can you fire a pistol?" Erich asked.

I looked over at my bedroll with my gunbelt draped over it. "I think so if you show me which end to point."

"I'm sorry. That was stupid of me." Erich walked over to the prop box and pulled out a Colt, a gunbelt, and a box of shells. "Put the belt on, and load the Colt, then fire all six as fast as you can."

I pulled a shell out of the box and noticed that there was no bullet. The shell had been plugged with cardboard to keep the powder from spilling out. After loading all six, I took the stance the way my pa had taught me, legs wide and a slight crouch. I holstered the gun and, as I drew, thumbed the hammer. When the gun was level, I fanned out six shots, then did the Texas twirl and sank it back into the holster.

"*Mein Gott!*" Erich murmured, then, "D. W.! You've got to see this."

Griffith was irritated. "What now?"

"Do it again, Ralph."

I walked over to my bedroll, took six shells out of my gunbelt, and loaded the Colt, then walked back and took the stance. Once the Colt cleared, I hemstitched a line parallel to and just short of the prop box, ended up with a long Texas twirl, and holstered the Colt.

Erich grinned like a proud father, and D. W. laughed his approval.

"Who taught you that?" D. W. asked.

"My dad and his brother used to marshal the towns along the Chisholm Trail back in the eighties. The gun fan was used if you had to face a gang of rowdy cowboys and you didn't have a scatter gun. The twirl, that's just showoff stuff."

All afternoon D. W. had us ride down the canyon shooting our guns off. There were me, George, and Erich decked out as bandits. They even pasted a mustache on me to make me look mean.

We did the run three times. D. W. called them takes. For each take Billy Blitzer moved the camera.

A little after four o'clock, the sun dipped under the canyon wall, and Billy declared there wasn't enough light. D. W. glared impatiently at Billy but finally bowed to the inevitable. When it came to breaking the set, there was no class distinction. Everybody helped stow the equipment. Actors and actresses dismantled and put away the white sun reflectors, wound the lighting cables, and folded the costumes.

Ramon and I finished loading the prop truck. I liked Ramon. He worked hard and always seemed to be smiling. Mae Marsh said that D. W. was thinking of working him up to hero roles. He was curly-black-haired-handsome, with an easy smile and China blue eyes. He had told Mae that he was from the East, but he seemed to have a slight foreign accent. We all thought Ramon looked about twenty except for Erich, who thought he was much older.

My job was wrangler, and the

horses had been ridden pretty hard, so Ramon and I unsaddled and walked them until they cooled off. We pegged them in the corral, wiped them down, curried and watered them, and finally strapped on their oat bags. Ramon showed me where to store tackle, saddles, and blankets. By the time we were done, the evening was coming up real fast.

I had just washed up when the dinner bell rang. Supper at D. W.'s table was T-bones and *pommes frites*, those French potato strips fried in oil, along with what they called asparagus hollandaise, all accompanied by a really inky wine. The crew ate meatloaf, mashed, and beer.

D. W., Erich, and Billy weren't at dinner for which I was really grateful, since it meant I could have Lillian all to myself. Lionel Barrymore was drinking scotch out of a flask and sharing it with George and Mae Marsh.

"How did you like your first day in photoplays?" Lillian asked.

"Pretty exciting. I hope we don't get shot at every day."

Lillian's laugh was a charming trill. "You know what they say about photoplays: 'The first day is the most exciting, and the next is the most boring.'"

"Hey, Ralph," Mae Marsh chimed in, "don't forget, you're parking your shoes under my bed tonight. If I can't get Lionel's younger brother, I guess I'll take you. That's if Lillian doesn't mind."

"Stop it Mae, you're embarrassing the poor man. He doesn't understand you're clowning around."

Mae batted her eyes furiously. "Clowning? Who's clowning?"

Erich walked in and came over to where we were sitting.

"Ralph, there's a deep canyon about three miles east of here with steep bluffs on each side. Do you know it?" he asked.

"Sure, Deeks Canyon. Why?"

"D. W. wants us out there now." He turned to Lillian. "Sorry to take your beau away."

"He's not my beau, Erich." She gave me a rueful smile. "We're going to be much closer than that." Suddenly her smile turned dazzling. "We're going to be great friends." And we were, for over sixty years.

Just as we saddled up, the sun went down, and the heat haze started to clear.

"So, Ralph," Erich said as we set off, "how's the ranching business going?"

"I'm really not a rancher. I'm helping my dad out with the herd right now, but I'm going back to Stanford University to study electrical engineering."

"We could use a man like you. Our electrician quit, and I have to do most of the electrical work myself. And frankly, I'm not very good at it. How do you like our photoplays?"

"I've been to the nickelodeon a few times, but personally I find them kinda dumb."

"Yes, most of them are silly, but not the ones *we* make. What we're doing here today will be studied in universities fifty years from now."

"Oh really, why?" I asked, ridiculing the idea.

“Did you ever see *The Great Train Robbery*?”

“Sure, everybody has.”

“Remember the part where the bandit shoots at the camera?”

“Oh yeah,” I grinned. “That was scary.”

He gave me a searching look. “Why? Why were you frightened?”

“Well,” I said trying to figure out what he was getting at, “you’re watching the show, and all of a sudden this guy sticks a gun in your face and pulls the trigger. Wow! That’s scary.”

“That’s it; you instinctively used the right word, You are *watching* the show, not part of it. You can enjoy the action, but it can’t hurt you. Then, in a blink of an eye, you’re *in* the action and about to be shot. Why? Because the camera that has been completely objective up until now suddenly turns subjective; it becomes you. In literature this is called point of view.

“Sidney Porter will be famous for only two things: making *The Great Train Robbery* and hiring D. W. Griffith. D. W. was the first to see the limitless possibilities of the camera, the first to realize we were inventing an entirely new storytelling language. You see, when you watch a play in the theater, you are seated in one spot. The actors can only move around in front of you. But in a photoplay the camera is your eye. It can sit passively as in a theater and watch the play, or it can participate in the action, move in and out among the actors, close in on a father’s face and see the horror and remorse when he learns of his son’s murder. The camera can

even play God. It can give you a glimpse of the past or the future, get in your head and show you your thoughts, your fears, even your dreams.” He gave me a strange look. “That, my friend, is scary.”

I grinned at him. “Gee! I thought this was a business, but with you guys it’s a . . . it’s a religion.”

Erich laughed. “Touché! Sorry. I do get carried away, don’t I, but then again, all art is a religion. The artist needs to be totally committed. He has to live for his art. Yes, more a monk than a priest.”

Except for the last softness of dusk, we were in almost total darkness. We both spotted the lantern and headed for it.

Erich stared at the sharp outline of a column of rock to the left. It stood on a small rise at the end of the canyon. “What is that magnificent tower?”

“We call it the Devil’s Thumb. The Navajos say that’s where they drove off the conquistadors. The Spaniards would ride north and round up Indians to work as slaves in the Mexican gold mines.”

We spotted the truck with the lantern next to it, but D. W. and Billy were nowhere in sight. The moon was about to clear the mountains, though, and soon we could just make them out on the tip of the ledge, five hundred feet above the canyon floor. The valley floor ends in a cliff that drops down, then levels off for thirty feet to form a ledge above the canyon. They were standing quite still, gazing out past the rim toward the San Lucas mountain range. As we joined them, D. W. whispered, “It’s coming.”

First the rim emerged from the darkness, its blurry black mass evolving into planes and angles. Then, slowly, the shape of a Joshua tree grew out of the pre-light, haloed in gauze by a moon just rising.

"There! There, that's it. That's what I want. See it?" he whispered anxiously. "That's what I want; can you get it, Billy?"

"I don't know, D. W. I don't know if the film's fast enough. I might be able to push the development a bit but . . ."

"Listen, Billy," Griffith, whispered, raising a finger to get his attention. "Imagine!" he said, making a rectangle with his hands and peering through it. "The exhausted band of outlaws stagger across the rim, horses' heads down, burned out. The men slump low in their saddles, all in a line, as they slowly cross the moon-hazed horizon." He turned to Erich enthusiastically. "What do you think?"

Erich, his arms folded across his chest, squinted at the rim. "You want this halo effect, D. W.?"

"Yes."

"There'll be no retakes," Billy warned. "The moon's coming up now, and you're losing it. It's one take or nothing."

"I know, I know, but it can't be helped. It's worth the risk; I need that shot."

I hated to burst their bubble, but I had to speak up. "You'll never get it."

"What! Why the hell not?" Griffith demanded.

"You should have shot it just now because it was your last chance. That moon won't rise over here to-

morrow. Right now the moon stays up for only about ten minutes before it slips behind the San Lucas range. Tomorrow it will rise behind the mountain, and you won't be able to see it from up here for another three weeks. You'll get some light up on Devil's Thumb but not down here."

They were silent for almost a minute.

"There's another way." Erich spoke quietly. "We'll lower two Cooper-Hewitt lamps over the lip of the canyon. We drop them down far enough so that we don't get their direct light." He turned to me. "Can we drive the generator truck down the cliff to the ledge?"

"We'd have to cut a new path, but it could be done."

"Good! We could drape the lamps in mosquito netting to diffuse the light. That should halo the rim very nicely. He turned to Billy. "What do you think?"

"Worth a try," Billy shrugged. They all looked at D. W.

He gave an abrupt nod. "We'll try it. Tomorrow night just after sundown."

All the next morning we shot Indian attacks on a cabin that wasn't there. Erich explained that the cabin would be shot in the studio back in New York. Ramon played the wily chief. In a closeup in which he was about to shoot Lillian, who was running for the cabin, he drew back the bow, but the string slipped out of the arrow's notch and the arrow fell harmlessly to the ground. Everybody laughed, and Ramon gave us a sheepish grin. D. W. growled, "What's so damn funny?"

Erich, Billy, and I drove the truck out to Deeks Canyon in the afternoon, and after clearing some rocks and cutting a switchback down the cliff, we were able to drive the truck onto the ledge. Using cables, we lowered the lights from the lip of the canyon, and almost lost one when the rope slipped. Erich made a quick grab and, bracing his feet against a boulder, held all two hundred pounds of lamp till I could secure the rope to a stump. Each lamp had been wrapped in mosquito netting just before we left. The last thing we did was bury the cables so the horses wouldn't trip over them. The only thing left was to connect the truck to the generator.

Meanwhile Billy plotted camera angles and finally marked off two positions for the shoot.

As we rode back, I started to think about sitting next to Lillian at supper and what I would say to her. I found out later that she wasn't needed in the night's filming so she'd gone into town and wouldn't be back till morning.

The last purplish blush of the sun had disappeared, allowing only dim starlight to silhouette the Devil's Thumb. "Light them up!" D. W. roared.

Being an electrical engineering student, I was put in charge of the power generator. We'd jacked up the back of the truck until the wheels were free, pulled off the left wheel, and coupled the axle directly to the generator.

When I powered up the engine, the generator began to whine as the voltage built up to the point

that the mercury vapor lamps ignited with a hissing pop. A gauzy blue haze rose from below the lip of the canyon.

"What do you think, Billy?" D. W. asked.

Billy Blitzler stood on his camera mark and peered at the luminescent fog through a lens. "Looks good, D. W." He moved to his second position and squinted again. "Ralph, can you give me more light?"

I pulled out the throttle a notch, and the blue mist brightened. "Good, right there, she's just right."

As our eyes adjusted to the eerie light, we could barely make out the rest of the crew. It was getting cold, and the horses were blowing mist.

"Erich, get them all saddled up and in position under the base of Devil's Thumb," D. W. shouted.

We all rode along the lip until we came to the bottom of the rise under the boulders. Erich checked each of us in the light of his flashlight. "All right, you people know what we want. I go first, Ralph next, and the rest of you follow. Walk your horses slowly, keep their heads down, and slump in your saddle. Remember, keep a length apart, and above all, ignore the camera. *The camera does not exist.*"

I mounted my horse and waited for D. W. to give the signal. Erich was dressed in a serape with a dirty, torn sombrero down low over his face. I was wearing jeans and a flap-front shirt. D. W. hadn't liked my hat and had made me change to a wide, floppy-rimmed Stetson.

"Action!" D. W. shouted.

Erich moved out at a measured



pace, and I followed. It was weird—the rim of the canyon with its strange bluegreen light and nothing much on the left but dim shadows and the hiss of the mercury vapor lamps mixed with the steady clicking of the camera gears as Billy cranked his little machine.

"Ralph," D. W. shouted, "don't tighten up. Sag, you're made of dough, you're dog-tired. The posse's been chasing you, and you've got just enough strength to make it back to the hideout. Good, good, that's better."

The camera was at the level of the horse's chest. As we neared it, D. W. guided Erich close to camera so that his stirrup almost grazed the lens. I approached as D. W. waved me on, and suddenly realized that we were being forever frozen in time, a young Erich von Stroheim and Ralph Walsh riding the rim of a canyon in the year of Our Lord 1912. This strip of film would keep me young, riding Wilbur along a canyon rim, and if what Erich said was true, fifty years from now students would ponder this piece of photoplay, wondering who these actors were and whatever became of them.

D. W.'s shout, "Again! Do it again," pulled me out of my reverie, and we went back to the bluff to walk the rim again.

After three takes—D. W. called the last his insurance take—Billy moved to position two, pointing the camera out across the canyon, to film us staggering one at a time from the left to be silhouetted by the ghostly blue light, then exiting into darkness on the right.

Each time I tried to do the scene exactly as I'd done it before, but my horse would move wrong, or I'd shift in the saddle or sag too much. Erich, to my amazement, could do it perfectly, time after time.

Just before the last take, Erich leaned over to me and said, "Don't think. You're thinking about what you're doing. Don't! Your horse and your body know what to do. Your mind just gets in the way. Try day-dreaming about a girl and you'll be fine."

It seemed to work. I thought of Lillian out here with me on a summer night and a sweet long kiss. By the time the kiss was over, I had crossed out of the frame and reined my horse next to Erich's. He gave my shoulder a friendly shake. "That was very good, Ralph."

We were facing Devil's Thumb when a leg of the camera tripod exploded. The bullet gouged out a long spark on a rock next to D. W. and ricocheted off into the canyon with a screech.

"Crutchly!" Erich shouted as he ran to the truck and switched off the generator, driving us all into inky blackness.

Suddenly we heard a loud twang, and someone screamed on top of the rise. "What was *that*?" D. W. demanded.

"I don't know," Erich countered, "but it came from up there."

We all stood in total darkness with only the starlight to outline Devil's Thumb and the mountains across the canyon.

"Crutchly? That you?" D. W. shouted. We could hear someone running up on the rise.

The shriek, when it came, sounded like a braking locomotive. A long high-pitched squeal that seemed to go on and on, echoing off the canyon walls, then abruptly ending in a long, low moan.

I kicked Wilbur, and we climbed toward the rise. Erich caught up with me, and as we climbed up to the boulders at the base, we heard a whimpering moan a few feet away. Erich switched on a flashlight, and we saw Crutchly lying at the base of a huge boulder, his rifle next to him, an arrow through his back and chest. Its broken shaft quivered as he breathed, but as the flashlight traveled up over his face, I whispered, "Oh my God!" His scalp was gone.

Erich bent down over Crutchly and put his hand into the pool of blood spreading on the ground around his head. He gently lifted the back of his neck.

Suddenly Ellsworth's eyes opened and he focused on Erich. "The redskin did it," he whispered. "He told me he was the last of them just before he scalped me, that Kurok bastard!" He coughed a loud, wet gurgle, and blood began dripping out of his mouth. "Why'd he do it? I never done him no harm."

"Who did this, Ellsworth?" Erich asked.

"Erich!" Crutchly grabbed his shirt. "You know me, Erich. I couldn't never hurt anybody." He started to cry. "I've been good to people all my life." The sob suddenly turned into a gurgling gasp, and then his eyes turned milky and we watched as Crutchly died.

D. W. walked up behind us and

stared down at the body. "Bastard certainly deserved it, but my God! to get it this way."

"There he goes!" Ramon shouted from below. He leaped onto his horse and raced towards camp, but as he crossed the stream, his pony slipped and reared, throwing Ramon belly first into the muddy water.

"Damn," Ramon shouted, "he's getting away." He came back covered from head to toe in mud. Someone handed him a blanket to keep the cold out.

"Ralph, do you know the sheriff?" D. W. asked.

"Yes, he's my uncle. The nearest phone is my folks' place. I'll ride over and call him."

"Good, then come right back, we may need you. Tell him we'll see that nothing is disturbed."

At dawn we spotted the sheriff's Model T sputtering toward us, a long plume of dust trailing behind it. He parked at the top of the ridge, and he and my father got out. Without a word they walked over and viewed the body. The sheriff was wearing a red blanket coat and a tall-crown Stetson. He finally turned to D. W., who was seated in a canvas chair next to the body. "You running this outfit?"

D. W. nodded.

"I hear he accused somebody," the sheriff said, jerking a thumb at Crutchly.

"Yes, he said something like 'a Kurok bastard did it.' Who were the Kuroks?"

"He must have been out of his head. The Kuroks were way up on

the Oregon border. They were all wiped out after the Modoc war."

My dad bent down and examined the scalp wound. "It's Apache work, Fred. Haven't seen this in a long time. Two cuts in front, two cuts behind the ears and the scalp peels back real easy. Ain't been any wild bands out here for twenty-five years or more, and them were Chiricahua out of Arizona during Geronimo's last run." He picked up Crutchly's rifle and sniffed. "It's been fired."

The sheriff pointed to me. "Ralph here told me on the phone that one of you people saw who did it."

"Yes," Ramon said, grinning as he stepped forward. He had changed into clean overalls and a sheepskin coat. "I thought I saw someone running down behind Devil's Thumb. I jumped on my horse and went after him, but the damn nag skidded in the creek and threw me."

"What did he look like?"

"Don't really know. Just saw something moving."

The sheriff looked at my dad and winked. "Probably a deer." He turned the body on its stomach and with a quick, practiced yank pulled out the arrow. "This ain't no Apache arrow, this is store-bought. The shaft's been machined."

"It looks like one of ours," Erich said. He turned to George. "Check the prop wagon and see if any of the archery sets are missing." He explained to the sheriff, "We were doing an Indian attack scene yesterday and were supposed to finish up this morning."

The sheriff looked around. "No-

body finishes up nothing till I'm through here."

D. W. rose from his chair. "What do you mean, we're not shooting today? We have a schedule."

Uncle Fred gave D. W. a hard look. "You're not shooting or whatever you call it because I'll be questioning your crew all morning. Another thing, your camera feller, does he have a regular camera for taking regular pictures?"

"Yes, we take still shots for locations and scene setups."

George rushed in. "A set is missing from the prop wagon."

Uncle Fred nodded as he studied D. W. "Crutchly took a shot at you yesterday; why didn't you call me?"

D. W. returned the sheriff's gaze with an ironic stare. "This isn't the first time we've been shot at, sir. Goons and bully-boys, paid by the Edison syndicate, have tried to break up our production before, and we know how to handle that. We're used to taking care of ourselves; besides, Erich nicked him in the right arm. We thought that would stop him."

The sheriff bent down and felt the bandage under Crutchly's sleeve. When he straightened up, he nodded.

"Okay. Tonight Ellsworth shot at you twice, so it looks like whoever killed him did it in self-defense. That's how it looks and that's how I'll write it up unless someone tells me otherwise. The fact that he took a little souvenir—" the sheriff shrugged—"that's his business. Now, I'm getting hungry, so get your cameraman to take some pictures. I'll tell him what shots to take. Af-

ter we're finished, your generator truck can take the body back to town. I'm not messing up the back seat of my Model T.

"I want you all to go back to your camp and have your cookie start breakfast. I'll be there later. After breakfast I'll start questioning you, one at a time."

As soon as the questioning was over, D. W. ordered us all out to shoot some more Indian attacks. Erich had driven the truck with Crutchly's body to the county coroner and didn't get back till late afternoon.

I was assigned to play an Indian firing his bow, and then a rancher being shot with an arrow. Four times D. W. ordered me to be blasted off my horse by cowboys. When Erich finally showed up, D. W. told him to take over, and we ran the scene till sundown. By then I was exhausted and pretty bruised up from all those damn falls.

Nobody had slept the night before, and we were all pretty glum at supper. I ate my steak and some fancy cooked potatoes somebody called lionazed. I wasn't even interested in talking to Lillian. I thought to myself, it's a rough business, this photoplay business. I was so bushed that right after supper I headed for my blanket roll.

I was deep in sleep when someone shook me. "Have you seen Erich?"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Wha-what's the trouble?"

D. W. shook me again. "Erich's gone, and I can't find him."

The night had turned frosty

clear, and as I got out of my warm blanket, the cold air gave me the shivers. I grabbed for my flannel shirt. "Who saw him last?"

"I did. After supper we played poker for a time and discussed wrapping up camp tomorrow. He left after ten, but he never made it to his tent. Lionel is his bunkmate, and a few minutes ago he woke me up and told me Erich never came in."

D. W. pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, tested the draw. "His horse is missing, and he's been gone for four hours."

"The idiot," I swore. "He doesn't know the country, and he goes riding off at night. Damn it!"

There was a haunted look in Griffith's eyes. "I can't lose Erich, he's my right arm, and on top of the Crutchly thing . . . I know, I know it was my fault. I shouldn't have hit him. Ralph, could you find him? You know this country, you were born here. Could you ride out and have a look?"

I was tying on my spurs as he spoke. I know how dangerous it can be to ride on a moonless night into canyon territory. A prairie dog hole, a slip on a steep trail, and you're down on your back with a broken leg and your horse runs off. "You're sure he's not with one of the girls?" I asked, hoping against hope that's where he was and that I wouldn't have to go.

"He's not with Mae. I checked. Erich doesn't chase women. He has a wife back in L.A. that he's crazy about."

"Is the truck still here?"

"Yes, over there."

"Then he didn't go to town; it takes too long on horseback. He's somewhere in the canyons. I'll circle around the south bluff, out to Deeks Canyon, then north to Binyon's Point and back. That's all I can do till sunup."

"I really appreciate this, Ralph," D. W. said.

Wilbur perked up the second he heard the tinkle of my spurs and trotted over. When he was saddled and ready, we headed along the south bluff, using only the starlight to see by. I gave Wilbur his head, and he trotted out surefooted, seeking the flat, sandy patches that show up chuckholes in the dim light. We ambled along the side of the bluff for a mile until it turned into obsidian bluffs. The black, glassy mineral winked and flickered in the starlight. Here the bluffs started to rise, then ran straight as a wall down to Deeks Canyon. When I crossed the creek near the cliff, I turned north toward Devil's Thumb. The canyon on my right was awash in deep sapphire light, softening the fissures and obscuring its vast depth.

A silvery-bronze shaft of moonlight slipped past the San Lucas range to touch the side of Devil's Thumb. As I approached, the sepia column walked down the side of the tower and lit the boulders near the spot where Crutchly was killed.

At the base of the rise I had planned to turn left and follow the north wall, but Wilbur suddenly stopped to sniff the air. He snorted once and turned toward the moon-drenched boulders, whinnying loudly.

An answering whinny came down from the rise. Wilbur didn't need any prodding; he charged and, once on top, stopped short to sniff the scent.

"Erich! Erich!" I shouted.

"Ralph, is that you?"

"Goddamn it, Erich! D. W. was worried; he sent me out to find you. What the hell are you doing out here?"

Erich gave me one of his mysterious smiles. "I'm waiting for him to come."

"Who?"

"The killer—he has to come back for his trophy."

"You mean the scalp? It and him are probably long gone by now."

"Oh no." He broke into a triumphant grin. "I found it. Go tie your horse up next to mine behind those boulders and I'll show you."

I pegged Wilbur next to Erich's horse and left them nuzzling each other.

Erich was waiting for me at the bottom of Devil's Thumb. "Come, we have to climb up a little way. It isn't bad, I did it this afternoon, and there's plenty of moonlight up here now. He parted the brush, and I saw the narrow path. Without hesitation he started the steep climb, walking the fourteen inch ledge that he called a path. Shaking my head, I started after him. The path switched back and forth, always climbing, until we were forty feet above the rise. Here it forked, the left arm curving up higher while the right one leveled out onto an overhanging spur of rock. Erich edged onto the spur, and as I followed, the first thing I noticed



was a niche formed between two slabs of rockface.

"Look!" he commanded, and switched on his flashlight.

There, standing against the back wall, was the bow the killer had used to shoot Crutchly, and lying on the ground, covered with flies, was something that looked like a gray-haired pelt.

"You sure he'll come?" I asked.

"Oh yes, it's the last night, and he killed for that trophy."

The moon came out for a brief instant, and a wave of metallic light swept west across the valley floor, silvering the canyons and gullies. As it struck the obsidian bluffs, it shattered like breaking glass. Then it all disappeared as the clouds came in and the starlight vanished.

I couldn't see his face, but his voice was sad. "He'll have to come tonight."

"Who is he, do you know?"

"Oh yes. Ramon killed Crutchly."

"Ramon!" I shouted, "That's crazy."

Eric suddenly pointed off into the night. "There! There he is! See that light?"

I turned, and we both watched the point of light far down the valley. It swung back and forth, making its slow, meandering progress along the valley floor.

"We'd better get down. He'll be here in a few minutes."

We descended the path to the base and found two large boulders that gave us hiding room and a good view of the approach to Devil's Thumb and the niche.

Once settled in, Erich cocked his head and put his finger to his lips.

"Listen!" he hissed. I sat perfectly still. In the distance I heard the ching, ching, ching of a horse's bridle. As we waited, the jingle got louder, and we could see the lamp swinging from his saddle horn. It lit the horse from the shoulders down, but kept the rider in shadows.

The rider staked his horse at the base and, lifting the lantern from his saddle, started to hunt for the path up to the niche. We heard the jingle of spurs as the lantern light made wide, swinging shadows across the face of the rise. The horseman climbed the last switchback, and as he approached the niche, he raised his lantern high and I could finally see it was indeed Ramon.

He squatted down on his heels and thrust the lantern into the niche. For a moment it glowed like a Christmas ornament.

Ramon took a piece of chamois from his pocket and spread it on the stony ground. Lifting the scalp gingerly, he laid it on the chamois and smoothed it with his palms. Looking up at the heavens, he started to chant as he slowly rolled the chamois into a tube with the scalp inside. Still chanting, he removed the bow and wrapped the chamois around its center. Rising to his feet, he continued the chant as he climbed down the path holding the bow out in front of him with one stiff arm until he reached the bottom.

He gathered a small mound of dried scrub, then selected a large, square, waist-high rock as an altar and spread the scrub on top of it in a round, flat disk. When he was

done, he took out his knife and carefully placed it on the left edge of the rock.

He raised the bow in both hands and, with a powerful snap, broke it in two; then he broke each piece again and arranged the pieces with great precision in a small square on top of the disk. Once satisfied that the pattern was correct, he positioned the chamois in the center and stared down at the square for a long time. After a while he began to chant again in a low voice as he lifted his lamp and unscrewed the oil cap. With a quick flip, he poured the kerosene over the square and let it soak into the scrub before lighting it. The flames swooshed up, sending flashes of orange light washing over the stones and up the face of Devil's Thumb.

"Do you think we should tell him we're here?" I asked.

Before Erich could reply, a voice behind us whispered, "Just keep quiet." We spun around, and there stood Uncle Fred in his high-crown Stetson and red blanket-coat. He made a soundless shushing gesture. "It's his atonement ceremony. Just let him finish it."

The sheriff squatted down next to us, and we all watched the fire consume the chamois. First we caught a whiff of smoking leather, and finally, the stink of burning hair.

Ramon had stopped chanting and was just staring into the fire. As the embers glowed, he lifted his knife and, with a quick slash, slit his palm. The blood pooled in his cupped hand and slowly dripped between his fingers, the drops fi-

nally falling into the fire with a loud sizzle.

"God!" I said, getting up to stop him.

The sheriff clamped his hand on my shoulder. "Don't, Ralphie! He has to atone for killing his enemy."

Slowly, one drop at a time, Ramon put out the fire with his own blood. When the last ember died, he wrapped his hand in his bandanna, pulling the knot tight with his teeth. Picking up his lantern, he mounted his horse and started back toward the camp. We watched him as he crossed the little stream. He stopped for a moment to look back, then slowly rode on.

"He got rid of a big load of guilt," the sheriff whispered. "He'll sleep like a baby tonight. Let's give him a little time to get back to camp."

He rose and stretched. "Might as well be comfortable while we wait." Motioning us to follow, he squeezed his large bulk between two boulders and disappeared. When we slipped through, we found a small enclosed space where the sheriff had hidden his Model T.

A rifle leaned against the fender, and a canteen hung from the door handle. The sheriff opened a duffel bag in the back seat and pulled out a large thermos. "Got some cups in here somewhere," he said, groping around. He finally dragged out some stone china mugs, poured the coffee, and passed us the cups. He used the thermos cap as his own cup.

We sipped our coffee. For a talkative man, the sheriff was strangely silent as he rolled the thermos cover in his large hands and stared

out at the point where Ramon had disappeared.

"He's a Kurok all right. In the daylight you can see it in the eyes and that squared-off jaw." He peered at Erich in the dark. "I saw you climbing around up there this afternoon. How'd you know it was Ramon?"

Erich smiled and looked sideways at the sheriff. "Our cameraman developed the three takes we shot last night. D. W. was right. The scenes were marvelous except for the last one. The one we were shooting just as Crutchly opened fire. Nobody noticed it but there were only five riders in the scene, not six. The missing rider was Ramon."

The sheriff nodded and pulled a pipe out of his blanket-coat; he tamped it down with his thumb before he started to dry-suck it. "Crutchly wasn't shot where he was scalped. There was no arrowhead. But his rifle shells were next to him. Interesting. I saw you climb the boulder next to where the body lay, Erich, and the look on your face when you seen the blood spot and the arrowhead gouge on the top of the rock, but ya didn't find the arrowhead, did ya?"

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the bloody arrowhead. "I had a look around just after you all left for camp. Found it on top of the boulder. Saw you stoop and stare at the blood spot, and then it hit ya: Crutchly was in a prone shooting position. The arrow was fired from way up. I could see all the gears in your head mesh.

"With me it was easy. First of all, going in I knew he was Kurok.

Then the scalping—anyone who scalps is going to be bloodied up some, and how convenient for Ramon to fall off his horse into a muddy stream and have to change clothes.

"The scalping and the fact that he was shot with an arrow pointed to a ritual killing. If you intend to kill a man, you use a gun or a knife. Think of it, Ramon could have killed Crutchly anytime he wanted to, but he chose this spot. Why?

"Because Devil's Thumb looks just like Kurok canyon country. No, Ramon was in contact with Crutchly and lured him here. Don't make sense any other way.

"At first the scalping threw me because Kuroks never scalped. They were a pretty peaceful tribe. But when I questioned Ramon this morning, I asked him where he went to school. Before he could really think about it, he blurted out Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I pretended not to recognize it, but it's the Indian school where they sent all the Apache kids after Geronimo surrendered. They cut their hair and beat them if they talked Apache. The kids must have taught Ramon how to scalp, Apache style."

"I notice," Erich commented, "that you speak of the Kuroks in the past tense."

"Yeah, they're all gone now except for Ramon. He's the last, I think. His father was probably a trapper who helped the tribe in some way. Their custom of gratitude was to offer him the prettiest maiden. If she bears a child, it takes a special place of honor in the tribe. By the way, the Kuroks are sup-

posed to be the best archers in the west. The boys are practically born with a bow in their fist."

"But why kill Crutchly? What was the motive?" I asked.

The sheriff downed the last of his coffee and carefully screwed the cover back onto the thermos. "I came across Crutchly just after the Modoc wars back in the seventies. Me and your dad came west together. We buffaloeed for a time, then we trapped and wolfed some. We finally ended up hunting fresh game for the rail gangs working the Pacific railroad.

"You see, the government financed most of the railroads and gave the companies the land for twenty miles on each side of the track. You talk about your robber barons—government made them the largest landowners in the state.

"Northern California was all wilderness then; most of it still is. First the railroad would send out the surveyors to mark where the line was to go. Then the enforcers rode out with their gangs to drive off any settlers or Indians they found within twenty miles of each side of the line.

"Ellsworth Crutchly was the head of an enforcer gang, and when he got liquored up some, he liked to tell stories about his glory days.

"With white folks, they had to be careful. But with redskins it was no holds barred. The enforcers liked to use them as targets to line up their rifle sights.

"First they'd ride into an Indian village and nail an eviction order to a tree to make it all legal-like. The Kuroks, knowing the gangs were in

the vicinity, would hide their women. Then, following tribal courtesy, they'd offer the gang food. Sometime during the fiesta the enforcers would open fire and kill all the men, and after that they'd go hunting for the women. Ramon was just a toddler then. But he must have seen Crutchly and never forgot him."

The sheriff suddenly stood up and yawned. "Gotta get back to town."

I stared at the altar stone with its bloodstains. "Suppose Crutchly hadn't fired at us and Ramon had killed him. What would you have done?"

The sheriff smiled.

"Since Ramon's a Kurok, pretty much what I'm doing right now. Nothing!"

He turned to Erich. "I've seen some of your nickelodeons, mister, and you realize you're filming all of this just as it's dying, don't ya? And you're getting it all wrong. There was nothing noble or pure about it. It was dirty hard work most of the time, and we were just trying to stay alive and keep what was ours.

"All that freedom without law back then turned a lot of good men real mean. I guess it doesn't matter if you pretty it up some. Hell! Ned Buntline and that lying drunk Buffalo Bill were prettying it all up back then with those dime novels and that Wild West show, so if you people gussie it up even more, I guess it doesn't really matter.

"But there'll be nothing left of the Old West in ten years. Just a few old geezers like me, remembering, and we won't be able to compete

with all the myths you're grinding out."

He took off his hat and scratched his head vigorously, then started to chuckle. "So the whole thing will be stood on its head. You birds and your myths will end up being believed, and we'll be the liars for contradicting ya."

The sheriff got into his car and switched on the ignition. "Give me a crank, Ralphie."

I grabbed the crank handle and gave it a quick turn; the engine caught with a series of pops that soon smoothed out a bit. When he turned on his headlights, the beams shot across the canyon and lit up the far side a mile off.

He slipped the Model T into gear and waved as he drove off.

Erich and I found our horses and mounted up. As we crossed the little stream, Erich looked back. "I have to remember it exactly as it was. I'm going to put it on film someday."

"As it was," I asked, "or as you'd like it to be?"

*As the door opened the old man's head snapped up. "Ah, Nurse Ratched with my supper tray strikes again."*

*The nurse, a large middle-aged woman with an easy smile, said, "Cut it out, Ralph. You know my name's Mary Kapdawl and I'd never recommend a lobotomy for a psychotic, even for Jack Nicholson, who probably needs one."*

*She lifted her head and sniffed the air. "Not scotch, rye; yes, rye whisky. Should we search your room again?" she said teasingly. "You know the rules." Turning, she*

*finally acknowledged the young man sitting next to the famous ancient director. "Young fellah, it's way past visiting hours. Mr. Walsh is a very old man and needs his rest. I'm sorry but you have to leave."*

*The young man leaned over and, taking the director's hand in both of his, he held it as if it were a religious relic.*

*"Mr. Walsh, it's been an extraordinary experience, sir. To listen to one of the men who was there at the first pink dawn of the film industry. This afternoon will appear verbatim in my book. Ah, just one more thing."*

*"Yeah, sonny, sure."*

*"You said Griffith was grooming Ramon for a big career? Did he ever become famous?"*

*"Off the record?"*

*"Sure."*

*"Sonny, who was the most popular romantic star of the twenties, first name Ramon?"*

*The young man thought for a second.*

*"You don't mean Ramon Nav—"*

*"Ah! Comes the dawn. You're really quick on the uptake, buster. Now beat it. Nursie here wants me to gum my pabulum. The only thing I have to look forward to these days is tapioca pudding and Law & Order reruns."*

*The young man nodded reverently and, with eyes still glowing, left the room.*

*"Did you have a pleasant afternoon?"*

*"It would have been a lot more fun if you'd crawled into bed with me. Just remember, I can make you a star."*



*The nurse smiled.*

*"You think you still got it in you, oldtimer?"*

*"If I had anything left of my prostate, you'd be peeing on a stick with a worried expression on your face about now."*

*The nurse, roaring with laughter, swatted at him with the napkin. "I think I'll let you keep the bottle. With that last remark you've earned it." She plumped up his pillow. "You tell that nice young man about Hollywood history?"*

*The old man looked at her. She could see he was trying not to smile, but the creases at the corners of his mouth started to creep upward. He tugged at his earlobe, a gesture he'd taught Bogart, and, still grinning, shook his head in wonder. "Man's got the IQ of a watermelon. What a putz! I stuck in every movie cliché in the book. Almost threw in Rin-Tin-Tin to the rescue, and still he didn't get it. Like Jack Warner used to say, 'Some schmucks will believe anything.'"*

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## SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

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In the fracas at Customs, Bart Fletcher was fatally struck by Earl Jenkins.

# IN LINE	COUPLE	FROM	PROFESSION	VISITED
1	George + Bertha Inman	PA	dentist	Tahiti
2	Jason + Flora Darnell	VA	realtor	Oman
3	Bart + Ida Fletcher	TX	artist	Rumania
4	Earl + Alice Jenkins	NC	tailor	Nairobi
5	Henry + Clara Colbert	TN	florist	Queensland
6	Charles + Elvira Adams	OH	optometrist	Venezuela
7	Frank + Helen Hawkins	SD	contractor	Spain
8	Ian + Greta Eakins	RI	salesman	Monaco
9	Abner + Della Baker	MN	banker	Palestine
10	Dan + Janice Granger	UT	mechanic	Uruguay

# NO DISCLOSURE

S. K. O'Toole



**F**orced ventilation off deep fryers a million miles past the recommended oil change saturated the air of the Waffle-Barn's parking lot with a stale grease aroma. Depending on personal taste, that can be either a turnoff or a come-hither. To me, coupled with the franchise's infamous all-you-can-stand breakfast, it constituted fine dining. Restaurant managers and short-order cooks usually throw in the towel long before I even think about loosening my belt. Maybe that was why Delores left me.

Certainly the long hours I'd spent working homicide hadn't helped the relationship. The rare evenings I'd been home were usually spent studying for the sergeants' exam. She'd said she understood I was trying to make good for us, that the late nights by herself at home didn't matter. So, the best I could figure, it must have been my marathon breakfasts that did our marriage in.

Whatever the reason, she was gone, and I just didn't want to go on alone. It wasn't supposed to hurt the way it did, bromide-defying belly-wrenching knots in my middle that stretched tendrils of numbness throughout my being.

Divorce is practically expected on the force. You just move on to the next case and the next sweetheart. Still, the prospects of a two hundred sixty pound Irish gorilla's finding someone as beautiful as Delores to put up with him and the job seemed slimmer than none. The hopelessness of the situation started affecting my work. I thought about her constantly throughout the day, especially on duty. I knew that sooner or later the mental sloppiness would get one of my fellow officers killed. So I came up with a plan to end it all after one final feast.

I topped off a 9mm clip with three live rounds. The rest were blanks I'd loaded myself. I didn't like the idea of Delores either blaming herself or gloating if I shot myself. That's how screwy my thinking got. I couldn't determine if she'd wail or do a jig when she got the news. Maybe I was just a coward, too wimpy to do the dirty work myself. I wasn't sure any more, about anything. One thing I felt I could count on. My brothers in blue would take me down.

Waffle-Barns don't take plastic or checks, just cash. They always sit somewhere near an interstate highway, sporting big yellow signs to hail truck drivers. So despite the cash policy, they always do a big business. This would endear them to each and every third-rate Clyde Barrow wannabe except for two things. The shift managers make regular money drops in a floor safe to which the district supervisor has the only key, and each diner boasts at least three panic bars. One is situated at either end of the counter, another under the register.

My plan sang simplicity. I would eat a hearty meal, pull my pistol, and drag out the mock robbery until the squad cars rolled in. Suicide by cop had gained popularity, so I would need to discharge the three live rounds into any empty car's windshield to present a valid threat. I would con-

tinue popping dummy rounds toward the officers, forcing them to open fire.

By three A.M., the joint had thinned out a little from the post nightclub crowd. Better than a dozen patrons still occupied the diner, but most were seated in booths. That gave me my choice of stools at the counter, which suited me fine. The left end of the counter opens to give the crew access to the back, while the right end wraps around and dead-ends into the orange tile wall. I chose the right end and the stool next to the wall.

This position fit the plan perfectly. If it weren't for the booth and window behind me, it could have doubled for the gunfighter's seat. The stools were situated just a hair low in relationship to the counter, but at six foot four, I had no problem seeing everything that occurred on the crew side. I could also see pretty much everything happening in the parking lot as well as the dining room floor, with the exception of some of the booths with their backs to me. Best of all, it assured me a peaceful last meal without someone spotting the bulge of my sidearm and blowing the whistle early.

I'd parked the department's vehicle at home and arrived in my Explorer. I'd left my holster in the truck and shoved my Browning in the right-hand outside pocket of my sport jacket. I'd removed the gold shield from my breast pocket and tucked it away in the left-hand pocket opposite my 9. I wanted the officers who searched me to know I'd been a cop, but I didn't think the general public needed immediate awareness of the fact.

In my confusion, I felt I'd thought it all out. It seemed like all the data on the planet, all the world's experience, melted inside my brain into this one final procedure, which I had calculated to the last detail. Of course I was wrong. One thing I hadn't figured on. I didn't expect the cute little brunette who took my order.

She glided up to my end of the counter in that brown and orange checked uniform that accentuated her dark eyes, ample breasts, and the gentle curve of her hips. She might not have been exactly supermodel material, but her smile sure was. It exuded warmth and genuine caring, the kind of smile sailors dream of returning home to.

"Hi. I'm Celeste. Can I get you *anything*?"

I tried to ignore her radiant smile and gruffly ordered the All-You-Can-Stand.

She responded as if I'd whispered a love poem in her ear. She turned the smile up another notch and winked. "Mmm. Coming right up."

She stretched over the counter to pour me a cup of joe and must have lost her balance. She swung the coffeepot behind her to avoid drenching me and shot her left hand out to catch herself. My reflexes kicked in, and I grasped her forearm in my left. Her hand in turn clutched my forearm for support.

She giggled as she gained her balance but didn't immediately let go of my arm.

She stopped laughing and squeezed my forearm. Tilting her head, she looked up at me with a gleam of admiration in her eyes. "Somebody must work out."

"A little," I muttered as I reached for the sugar dispenser in order to pull away from her.

"It'll be just a minute on the waffles, Muscles." She grinned and hurried off to fill my order.

It continued like that. Each time I grunted or snarled in her direction, she reacted as if I'd sent her a dozen roses, like I was the sweetest lamb in Bo-Peep's flock. I got a funny feeling after my sixth order of bacon and waffles, and it had nothing to do with too much syrup.

That's when I came to my senses. What the hell was I thinking? Bad enough that what I meant to do would grieve my fellow officers. I'd certainly detract from the already low public opinion of the force. But worse, I'd traumatize some sweet, hardworking gal who'd treated me like a prince when I was acting like a horse's rear end. I couldn't hold her hostage, but I did want to hold her. If I'd felt better about myself, I'd have asked her out right then and there. I never got the chance.

I saw the filthy white '78 El Dorado pull into the lot. It would have been hard not to notice it, the way the front end bobbed up and down like a kid on a pogo stick. The driver eased the rolling trampoline past the entrance. At the far end of the lot a young Latino dressed in loose fitting warmup gear got out of the vehicle. The driver made a U-turn. The car rolled slowly back in front of the diner's entrance, where another Hispanic piled out. Then the Caddie left the parking lot.

The odd taxi-delivery routine waved a red flag at me. When the two former passengers of the pimpmobile sat down at opposite ends of the counter, that flag went into semaphore mode. As the one on my end took his stool, a bulge of something appeared briefly under his sweatshirt. They planned to hit the place.

I had to think fast. High ratings on the firing range give no assurances on the street. I had only three rounds. The potential perp next to me was as good as dead, but that still left the one at the other end of the diner and the driver. Chances were that if all hell broke loose the driver would simply bolt. I just didn't like rolling the dice with the lives of civilians, especially when one was the scintillating Celeste. If these punks were gang-bangers, the getaway guy was probably armed and ready to lay down cover fire to aid his amigos. It would just get messier from there. A similar scenario six months earlier in Hillsboro had left three dead and one paraplegic.

My best hope lay in the moment of decision to disclose. Once the guns came out, there was no going back.

"Do you know what you want or do you need a minute?" Celeste asked my neighbor.

"Not yet." He glanced down the counter at his partner as he reached

for one of the menus next to the napkin dispenser. "Just some coffee for now."

"You got it. How about you, Handsome?" She turned to me. "Another round?"

Handsome? She called me Handsome? When I was going up through the ranks, most of my peers thought calling me Gorillagan instead of Dunningan was kind. During the past seven helpings of hash browns, pork belly, and crispy brown batter, she'd waited on several other men at the counter. They'd all been served graciously but never complimented. She'd reserved that special comment for me.

Whoa! Pull in the reins, Ben. Something had just transpired that I needed to focus on. The suspect spoke English. That might be enough, I told myself.

"Could I have my check, please?" I asked.

"Are you sure?" She gave me her highest wattage smile, fluttered her eyelashes, and rocked back and forth on her tiptoes. "I could watch you eat all day."

Containing my desire for this little minx took everything I had. Fortunately, I managed to bridle my emotions long enough to act on the problem at hand.

"Thanks, ma'am. I've had plenty, but let me ask you something."

"Sure, sugar. What?"

"Do you give police officer discounts?" I pulled my shield out of my left pocket and laid it on the counter as I took hold of the Browning in my right.

Celeste found that question hilarious and didn't even try to keep from laughing. When she caught her breath, she put her hands on her hips and gave me a fake scolding. "Like you wouldn't get your money's worth any other way."

Then she grinned, added, "Let me go check," and trotted off to talk to the manager.

I cut my eyes over to the banger and caught him checking out my badge. He looked from the shield up to me. I didn't blink. I fixed my sights on him but remained motionless, poker-faced. It was his move.

For a moment it could have gone either way. A freshly lit cigarette hung from his lips, and thin streams of smoke billowed up under the bill of his Rangers baseball cap. He squinted through the smoke, sizing me up.

Maybe the fact that I outweighed him by a hundred and fifty pounds turned the tide. Maybe it spooked him that he couldn't see what I had in the hand on the other side of my self-made mountain. Regardless, he crushed the cigarette into the ashtray, got up from the stool, and motioned with his head to the partner. They left without a word.

I watched them leave the parking lot on foot in the opposite direction from where I sat. I almost didn't notice the blue-green ticket slide up under my badge.



"Sorry, sugar. I think the manager feels like you almost wiped him out already."

"No problem," I responded, wondering how the manager would react if he knew how close that was to the truth.

I pocketed my badge and then looked at the check. "What's this?"

CELESTE TEAL was written at the bottom of the ticket, alongside a phone number.

"I'm in the book, but I thought if I saved you the trouble of looking it up you might actually call me sometime." She was working that smile again.

I dropped a five on the counter for her and gave her a rare glimpse of the Dunnigan grin. I thought she would melt like so much butter on a stack of cakes.

"Count on it," I said.

"I will."

I paid, left, and immediately found a pay phone outside to call in a description of the El Dorado and its occupants. While I waited for dispatch to route me to the duty officer, I looked at the check again. Celeste Teal. A real angel had saved me that night. Maybe I had saved her as well. Someday I might let her know about the first salvation. She never needed to know the rest.

**Note to Our Readers:** If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



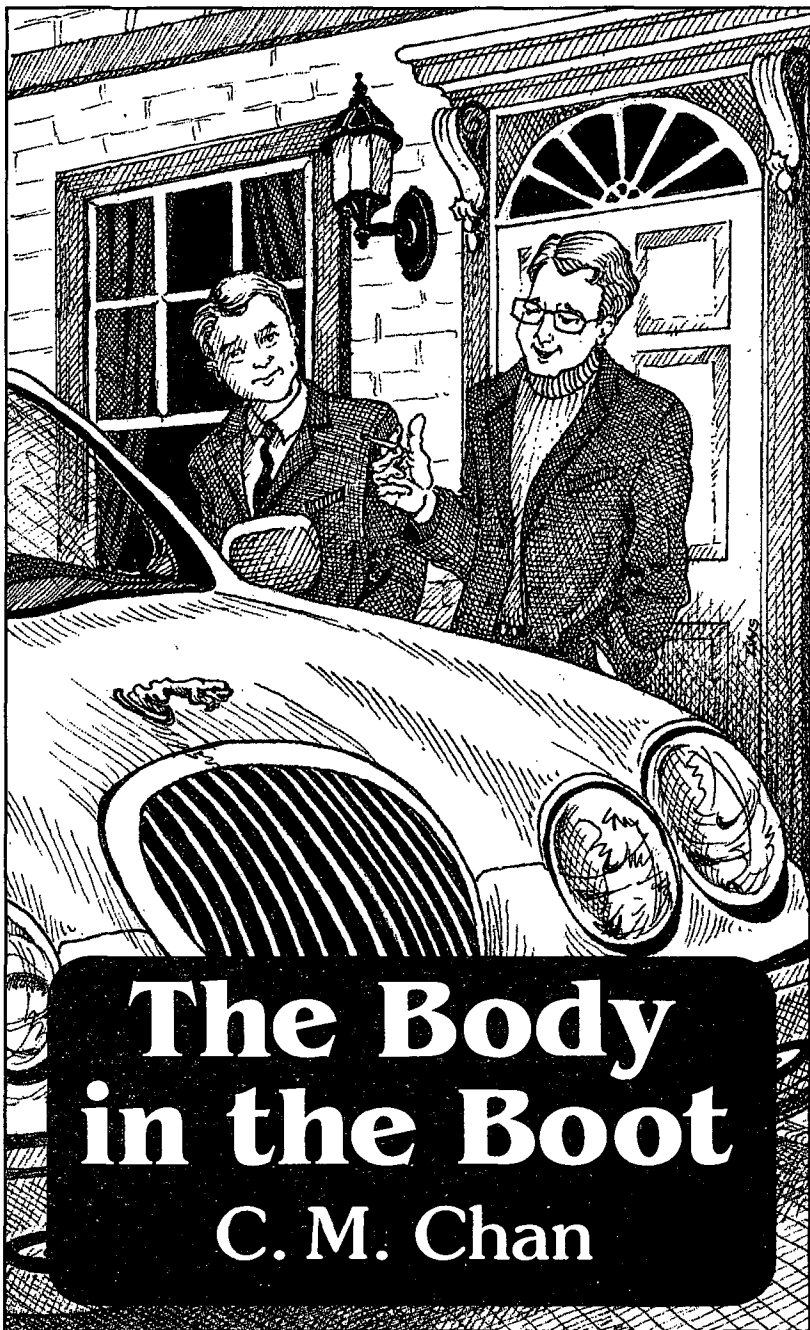
*Hulton Archives*

Scouting. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



FICTION



# The Body in the Boot

C. M. Chan

*Illustration by Linda Weatherly*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/02*

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**T**he new Jaguar S-Type sat at the curb, a sleek and shining tribute to the blending of art and machine.

"Do you like it?" asked Phillip Bethancourt excitedly, pushing his glasses back up.

Detective Inspector Jack Gibbons felt a wave of envy wash over him as his eye took in the rounded nose with the silver Jaguar leaping from the incline. "It's beautiful," he said. "I didn't know you were getting a new car."

"It was about time," said Bethancourt, standing back to admire his new acquisition. "The XJ was five years old." He cocked his head. "What do you think of the colour? I decided on a change from the old grey."

Gibbons considered the gleaming silver-green body. "I like it very much."

Bethancourt peered at the interior. "It's supposed to have an ivory interior," he said, "but what with Cerberus and all, I decided I'd better have taupe. I still think it looks all right."

Gibbons glanced at the large Borzoi hound, who was sniffing with interest at the boot. "Much more practical," he agreed. "The back seat would soon be taupe anyway if you'd got the lighter colour."

"True."

Bethancourt jingled the keys in his hand and grinned. "Let's see how she goes, shall we?" he asked. "I got the V-8 engine, of course, and the sports package."

Gibbons agreed enthusiastically and moved round to the passenger door. Bethancourt opened the rear

door and called to his dog. But Cerberus ignored him and continued his inspection of the boot area.

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "Into the car, Cerberus," he said more firmly.

This time the dog looked back at his master, but he still made no move toward the open door. Instead he sat down, his entire stance that of a dog who does not intend to be moved.

Gibbons paused, caught by this uncharacteristic disobedience.

"Maybe he doesn't like the new-car smell," he suggested.

Bethancourt was frowning down at his pet. "That doesn't make any sense," he said. "Cerberus, come."

The Borzoi whined and looked back at the boot but did not move.

"Have you got a box of dog biscuits in there?" asked Gibbons.

"There's nothing in the boot," answered Bethancourt. "I haven't even opened it yet. But there's something wrong."

He moved toward the rear of the car, and immediately Cerberus rose, his feathered tail waving encouragement. Gibbons joined his friend as he opened the lock and let the lid of the boot spring open.

"Bloody hell!" gasped Bethancourt, jumping back.

Gibbons had jumped as well, but almost at once he leaned forward again to look down at the young woman curled into a fetal position in the boot. Her long dark hair hid her face, but the skin of her arm was the bluish-white of a corpse. Gibbons caught hold of the wrist, but it was cool against his fingers and there was no pulse. Moreover,



the arm did not move at his touch; rigor mortis had set in.

Bethancourt, who was still standing some feet back, asked anxiously, "Is she dead?"

"Very." Gibbons continued to inspect the body. She was wearing jeans and a white silk shirt, both marked with long streaks of dirt. He slid his hands along the back pockets of the jeans, but they were empty. The front pockets were inaccessible, owing to her curled-up position. He peered around the corpse, but the rest of the boot seemed to be empty.

He brought out his handkerchief and used it to protect his fingers while he closed the boot. "You say you hadn't opened the boot," he said to his friend. "Had you been in the rest of the car? Opened the bonnet or got into the driver's seat?"

Bethancourt, looking rather pale, shook his head. "I was waiting for you," he replied.

Gibbons bent to examine the lock. "This doesn't look tampered with," he said. He glanced up and down the street. "How long has the car been out here?"

"Half an hour or so," answered Bethancourt. He took out a cigarette case and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. "Robert Creamer brought it round this morning and took the XJ away. I had a look and then went to ring you."

Gibbons frowned and ran a hand over his short, reddish-brown hair. "It rather looks as if she was in the boot when the car was delivered, then," he said. "Where did it come from?"

"Creamer's got a dealership in

Kensington," said Bethancourt. "He knows me—I always had the XJ serviced there."

Gibbons nodded and fished his mobile phone out of his pocket. "I'll call it in," he said.

Bethancourt lunged and grabbed his arm as he raised the phone to his ear. "Wait! Don't!"

Gibbons turned to his friend, surprised. "Don't? Why not?"

Bethancourt dropped his hand from his friend's arm and looked rather shamefaced. "It's just—" he began, and then broke off.

"What?" demanded Gibbons.

"Because they'll cover it with fingerprint powder," burst out Bethancourt.

"Well—yes," admitted Gibbons. "There's a body in it, after all."

"They could impound it," wailed Bethancourt. "And I haven't even had a chance to drive it yet! Not even once round the block."

"Well, you can't drive it now," said Gibbons practically. He took pity on his friend. "I'll have them clean it up nicely when they're done," he said.

"It's not the same," muttered Bethancourt, turning away.

"I can't help that," said Gibbons, dialing.

While he spoke, Bethancourt huddled back against the wall of his building and stared at the S-Type mournfully.

"They're sending the SOCO's—the scene of crime officers—over now," said Gibbons, ringing off. "I'm rather afraid we will want to impound it because it looks as if she might have been run over. I can't be sure, of course."



"You mean it's a murderer?"

"It?" asked Gibbons.

"The car! My beautiful new car. You mean it's killed someone?"

"Well, it's only one possibility," said Gibbons soothingly. "Look here, would you rather wait inside? I've got to stay here, but there's no reason you should."

"No, I'll wait with you." Bethancourt lit another cigarette, and a grim look came into his hazel eyes. "I'm going to have words with Creamer," he said. "I'd like to know what he means by giving me a car with a body in the boot. If he's taken to driving about London running people over, the least he can do is keep it to himself. And," he added, "use his own car, not one I've just paid him fifty thousand pounds for."

"We'll be speaking with Creamer shortly," said Gibbons reassuringly. "His place will be my first call once we're done here."

Mr. Creamer was considerably surprised to see Bethancourt, the more so as he came without the S-Type. He hurried over as they entered the showroom.

"Mr. Bethancourt!" he exclaimed. "I hope there's nothing wrong with the car?"

"It could hardly be worse," said Bethancourt severely.

"But it was running beautifully when I drove it over this morning!"

"It may be running beautifully now," said Bethancourt morosely. "God knows I haven't had a chance to judge."

Creamer could make nothing of this, and looked inquiringly at Gibbons.

"I'm Detective Inspector Gibbons," said Gibbons, and Creamer started. "Have you an office we might talk in?"

"Yes, certainly," said Creamer in a very uncertain tone. "This way, please. You know, of course, Mr. Bethancourt," he added in an injured voice, "if there's anything the matter with the car, I would naturally order another for you."

"It's not that kind of problem," said Gibbons as Creamer ushered them into his office. "We found a body in the boot."

Creamer looked uncomprehending. "A body?" he repeated. "What sort of body?"

"A dead one," answered Bethancourt.

Creamer was horrified. He turned to Gibbons for confirmation.

"It was the body of a young woman," said the detective. "We have not yet identified her. She had straight dark hair, a little longer than shoulder length, and was very trim. About eight stone, five feet five or six. Does that sound like anyone you know, Mr. Creamer?"

Creamer had sunk into a chair and was shaking his head. "No," he muttered. "At least . . . well, that's not unlike Laurie Pells, but it can't be her. She's here now and quite alive."

"Did you check the boot this morning before you drove it over?"

"No, no. Why should I?" Creamer straightened, regaining his grasp of the essentials, and turned to Bethancourt. "I will order a new car for you immediately, Mr. Bethancourt," he said with dignity. "I quite see that you would not wish to keep





one that has been used as a—as a coffin.”

“The important point,” said Gibbons rather impatiently, “is how the body got into the car in the first place. Would anybody have looked in the boot since it arrived here?”

“Well, presumably the boy who cleans the cars would have checked it—at any rate, he’s supposed to. I can’t think why anyone else would.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. A young woman, her eyes alight with curiosity, put her head in and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Creamer, but there’s a policeman out here to see you.”

“Another one?” Creamer turned to Gibbons, who shrugged.

“Not one of mine,” he said. “Better have him in.”

The man who entered was a plainclothes detective of about forty who introduced himself as Detective Inspector Parkinson from the Earl’s Court Road station. He was considerably surprised to find Scotland Yard already in charge of his witness.

“I didn’t realise the Yard was involved, sir,” he said to Gibbons. “Perhaps I should just make a report to you.”

“Let’s make sure we’re here about the same thing first,” said Gibbons. “As it happens, I’m simply johnny-on-the-spot. My friend here found a body in the boot of his new Jaguar, which was delivered this morning.”

Parkinson pulled out his notebook. “Was it a custom-made green S-Type?” he asked.

“Alpine,” muttered Creamer, “not green.”

“That’s right,” said Gibbons. “The body was that of a young woman.”

“Then I think I’ve got your man down at the station,” said Parkinson, closing his notebook with a snap. “He and his brother came in this morning to report a hit-and-run in Pitt Street last night.”

Gibbons raised an eyebrow. “Last night? And how did they come to conceal the body in one of Mr. Creamer’s Jaguars?”

“He was driving it,” answered Parkinson.

“He couldn’t have been!” protested Creamer. “That car was here when I locked up and left last night, and it was still here this morning.”

“Yes, sir,” said Parkinson easily. “The driver was an employee of yours, Wally Duncan.”

“Wally!” exclaimed Creamer, greatly taken aback. “But Wally—well, I’m sure he would never think of taking one of the cars out. He couldn’t. He’s, well, a little backward.”

“Mentally challenged,” affirmed Parkinson. “No, apparently it wasn’t his idea at all. What happened was, he’d been cleaning the car last thing before he left last night and pocketed the keys by mistake. He didn’t realise that until after he’d got home and his brother, who takes care of him, had gone out on a date. Wally knew you, sir, were planning to deliver the car this morning, and so he thought he’d better come and put the keys back. But just as he’d figured this out (it seems it took him a bit to decide what to do), some friends of his brother’s came round, looking to see if their mate fancied a pint at

the local. Wally told them his brother was out and explained that he was waiting for him so he could go return the keys."

"But Wally doesn't have the keys to get into the building," protested Creamer.

"No, sir, but I believe his brother does?"

"Oh. Yes, of course," muttered Creamer.

"His brother works here as well?" asked Gibbons.

"Yes," said Creamer. "He's a very fine mechanic, Jeff Duncan. That's how I came to hire Wally to start with. And Wally's usually a very good lad—splendid at cleaning the cars up once they've arrived and excellent at parking them. I can't believe . . ." He shook his head, his voice trailing off.

"Well," continued Parkinson, "Jeff's friends got the whole story out of him and persuaded him to take them for a ride in the Jaguar. Wally knew he shouldn't, but since he's rather slow, they were able to talk him round. Only Wally insisted on driving, and once they got out and were urging him on towards the M4 so they could get her up to speed, Wally rebelled. He'd finally worked out that all the reasons they'd told him the joyride would be all right weren't true, and he stopped the car and made them get out right there. Then he drove the car back, but as he was coming along Pitt Street, he hit the woman. He claims he didn't see her at all, just felt the car go over her and stopped to see what it was. He was panicked, of course, and couldn't think out what to do. Finally he de-

cided it would be best to bring her back here and then wait at home for his brother to show up and tell him what to do."

"It didn't occur to him that he ought to get help for her?" asked Gibbons.

"No. He believed she was already dead—perhaps she was. Not having seen the body, I couldn't say."

Parkinson raised an inquiring eyebrow, but Gibbons shook his head. "There's no telling until we get the results of the P.M.," he replied. "It's possible, certainly. But why didn't they report it before now?"

"Unfortunate, that," said Parkinson. "But it seems that Jeff Duncan didn't go home at all last night. He turned up about eleven this morning, in time to get his brother some lunch, and that was the first he knew of it. Wally, of course, had been waiting patiently all night."

Gibbons sighed. "Well, it seems clear enough," he said. "I don't see why your people can't handle it. I'll just come along and have a word with Wally if you don't mind, and then I can file my report and direct forensics to report to Earl's Court."

"Thank you," said Parkinson. "Where's the car now if I might ask?"

"We impounded it," answered Gibbons. "You can run over and look at it whenever you like." He turned to Creamer. "I'm very sorry this happened, sir," he said, "but at least it's been cleared up quickly. Will you want to press charges against Wally for taking the car?"

Creamer hesitated, glancing at Bethancourt.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Bethancourt. "It seems a very sad story to me—no point in making it worse."

"As you say, Mr. Bethancourt," replied Creamer. "You've been very good about all this. I'm extremely sorry you've had the trouble."

Bethancourt waved a hand. "In the meantime," he said, "if you would be so good as to provide me with a car of some description?"

"Certainly!" said Creamer with alacrity. "You can have your pick of anything in the showroom—or, of course, there's your previous motor car."

"The old XJ will be fine," said Bethancourt. "I'll pick it up once we're done at Earl's Court."

They made their way out and began the walk to the police station.

"I take it," said Gibbons to Parkinson, "that you're quite sure this story's the right one? No chance Wally's being made use of?"

"I don't think so," said Parkinson, "although of course I've yet to check it out. First thing was to get hold of the body. But the brother's got a solid alibi if it's confirmed."

"I was thinking more of his friends," said Gibbons. "Doesn't it strike you as odd that they'd let Wally drive? It seems to me that if I were stealing a sports car, I'd want to drive it myself"

"Oh, I'm sure they did. But Wally wasn't comfortable with the whole thing, and I gather he was going to refuse to take the car out at all if it weren't agreed that he should drive. They probably hoped to persuade him to change his mind once they were on the road."

At the station, Parkinson was hailed as they entered by both the desk sergeant and another, younger detective waving a fax. Parkinson made a face.

"Everything always happens at once," he sighed. "Look here, can you go on by yourselves? The Duncans are in the interview room, second door on your left."

Gibbons acceded to this request gracefully, the more so as he much preferred to interview the suspects without Parkinson looking over his shoulder.

There was little family resemblance between the brothers. Wally was a very large young man, fair and slightly overweight, while Jeff was thin and wiry and dark-haired. He started on seeing Bethancourt and looked thoroughly bewildered.

"Hullo, Jeff," said Bethancourt. "This is my friend Detective Inspector Gibbons from New Scotland Yard."

Horried realization was dawning in Jeff's eyes. "It was *your* car, Mr. Bethancourt?" he blurted. "Oh, God—"

Wally flinched.

"It's all right," said Bethancourt. "I understand it was an accident."

"It was," Jeff said earnestly. "I wouldn't want you to think Wally would do anything like that in the normal way, sir. I'm terribly sorry it should have been you; you've always been such a good customer, sir."

Gibbons sat down. "I think the police here will be handling this, but I'd just like to go over your story before I turn the case over."

"It's all my fault, sir," said Jeff



miserably. "Wally would never've got into this mess if I hadn't gone out. And I should have rung him to make sure he was all right."

"You couldn't have known," said Gibbons kindly. "Wally?"

With a good deal of prompting, Wally told the same story they had already heard from Parkinson. Gibbons questioned him closely about his brother's friends and who was driving, but he remained firm on that point and there seemed no reason to think he was lying. Indeed, as easily confused as he was, it would have been nearly impossible for him to have lied successfully. He spoke slowly, with real distress, and Bethancourt felt sorry for him.

"So you didn't see the woman?" asked Gibbons.

"No, sir. I felt the car go over something, so I stopped to make sure I hadn't hurt it. I've driven down that street before and there's no big bumps like that on it."

"How fast were you driving at the time?"

"Not fast at all, sir. It's only a little street, Pitt Street. I couldn't have been going faster than thirty."

"I see. But you were upset last night. You got rid of your friends and then drove back to the dealership. Were you angry?"

"Yes, sir," said Wally. "I was mad at them for making me do something I shouldn't."

"Very natural," said Gibbons. "You turned into Pitt Street on your way back. Try to remember what the street looked like. Was there anyone there? Any other cars driving along?"

Wally thought, his eyes closed. Finally he said, "I don't remember anyone. It was all very quietlike."

"Yes, and it was dark. As you drove along, did anything distract you? Did you take your eyes off the road to check your speed or anything?"

"I don't think so," said Wally slowly. "I wanted to get back. It all looked different at night."

"But you never saw the woman?"

"No, sir." Wally shook his head emphatically. "I never did. I felt the car go over something that oughtn't to have been there. I stopped and got out because I was worried I'd hurt the car."

"So you were surprised to see the woman lying there."

Wally's eyes widened. "Oh yes, sir. I was scared."

"Very well, then," said Gibbons, rising. "I'd just like to have a word with your brother, Wally."

He beckoned Jeff out with him. Bethancourt followed and closed the door firmly behind them.

"I'm sorry about this, Duncan," said Bethancourt. "It's a rotten thing to have happen to Wally."

"Yes, sir," said Jeff miserably. "I can't understand it. Wally's a careful driver—I couldn't have recommended that Mr. Creamer hire him if he weren't. Wally has to park the cars."

"I expect it was his being so upset that did the mischief," said Gibbons. "But it's clearly a case of diminished responsibility. I doubt it will come to trial."

Jeff looked at him. "What keeps bothering me," he said, "is the thought that she wasn't killed out-



right, and that poor Wally just put her in the trunk and let her die there, not knowing any better."

"We won't know about that until the post mortem," said Gibbons kindly. "But people sometimes are killed instantaneously in traffic accidents—Wally might have been quite right in thinking she was dead. Don't fret over it."

Jeff nodded but was clearly not reassured. Nor did Gibbons think there was much chance she had died at once, but there was no use in worrying over it now.

"I just wanted to say," continued Gibbons, "that D.I. Parkinson will be speaking with your friends—speaking rather sharply I would imagine."

A grim look came into Jeff's eyes. "He can't be sharp enough to suit me, sir," he said. "I've a mind to have words with them myself."

"Well," said Gibbons as they emerged from the station into the pale September sunshine, "that's that, then."

Bethancourt grunted morose agreement. "It's a pitiful story," he said. "I wish it hadn't been my car mixed up in it. Here, lend me your mobile a moment, will you? I came out without mine."

"Who are you ringing?" asked Gibbons, producing the phone from his jacket pocket.

"My solicitor," answered Bethancourt. "I think I'll just ask him to step round here and extract Wally from Parkinson's clutches. The poor kid needs someone standing up for him."

When he had finished his con-

versation, he handed back the phone and asked, "Now what?"

"I think I'd like to have a look at Pitt Street before I report in," said Gibbons thoughtfully. "Since Parkinson didn't have a body when he left the station this morning, I'm reasonably sure he hasn't been over the scene of the crime."

"Very well," said Bethancourt, falling into step beside him. "Are you thinking of her purse?"

"Yes," answered Gibbons. "I'd like to get her identified. Obviously, we won't know what, if anything, is in the front pockets of her jeans until after the rigor has passed off, but it does seem strange that she came out without a wallet."

Bethancourt shrugged and paused to light a cigarette. "Not if she lived nearby," he answered. "She might have stuck a few pounds in a pocket and tootled off to the local pub for a drink."

"She might, of course," agreed Gibbons. "If I were Parkinson, I would be doing a house-to-house at this moment. Perhaps," he added generously, "when we get there, we'll find his minions are doing just that."

But there was no sign of any police presence in Pitt Street. Nor, though they spent an hour searching and going through dustbins, was there any sign of a purse.

"There's always the possibility someone came along later and lifted it," said Gibbons, wiping his hands on his handkerchief.

Bethancourt frowned. "I don't like this sort of case," he complained.

Though Bethancourt was an avid



amateur detective and regularly dogged Gibbons' steps, he was never interested in his friend's more mundane cases. It was the personalities in a case that fascinated him, and the challenge of winnowing out which was covering up a flaw that would lead to murder. If the body had not been found in his own car, he would never have taken an interest in this case.

"It's not a very pleasant one," agreed Gibbons placidly. "Let's get back to the Yard and annoy forensics."

The forensics team did look annoyed to see them when they arrived. "Look here, inspector," protested Ralph Witherspoon, "you can't possibly expect we'd have anything for you yet. The bloody car's only just arrived."

"Anyone look at the front bumper yet?" asked Gibbons.

"Nobody's looked at anything yet," replied Witherspoon. "And the longer you keep me here chatting, the longer it'll be before anyone does."

"All right, all right," said Gibbons, grinning. "Just make sure they give that bumper a good going-over."

Witherspoon snorted as he turned away. "Everything will get a good going-over," he said.

Gibbons glanced at Bethancourt. "I'd better go report to the super," he said. "Do you want to wait?"

Bethancourt checked his watch. "No," he answered. "I should get home and walk Cerberus."

"All right. I'll ring you later."

Bethancourt was welcomed home exuberantly by his dog. He took the lead from where it hung on

a hook by the door, and then noticed that his answerphone was blinking. He stabbed the play button and bent to clip the lead onto Cerberus's collar.

"Hello, Phillip," came the voice of Marla Tate. "I rather expected I'd have heard from you by now. Didn't the car come? Well, ring me and let me know what time tomorrow you think you'll be back."

"Oh God," groaned Bethancourt, who had forgotten all about his girlfriend. He hesitated and then said, "We'll have our walk first, old boy. I've got to think what to tell her."

Marla was a fashion model, and last June she and Bethancourt had taken an *appartement* together in Paris. During the ensuing months, it had become clear that Marla had envisioned their spending most of their time there, while Bethancourt still considered London to be his home. Therefore any delay in his return would inevitably touch a sore spot in their relationship. To complicate matters further, Marla had always loathed Bethancourt's detecting hobby, and he usually tried to keep the fact that he was investigating a case from her.

"But this one's not my fault," he said to Cerberus as they walked briskly across the Albert Bridge toward Battersea Gardens. "I didn't want to find a corpse in my new car. And at least it's a decent excuse for not coming back right away. I can tell her that as a material witness, the police don't want me leaving the country."

In fact, he admitted to himself, the police would probably not much care whether he was here or in



Paris, but Marla wouldn't know that. She would not be happy, but nothing short of his prompt arrival in the *rue de* — tomorrow afternoon would make her happy. And he was determined not to leave London until he had a new car, untainted by corpses. He hoped that would wash the taste of this episode away.

The body remained unidentified over Sunday. Gibbons had washed his hands of the case, but Bethancourt had a morbid desire to see it through. He wished to know at least whom it was his car had killed.

It was not until mid-morning on Monday that Gibbons rang to report success.

"Missing persons has come through," he announced. "Or so we think. A Donald Michaels reported his wife missing this morning. The description fits, and he last saw her on the Friday night."

"Friday?" repeated Bethancourt. "Why on earth didn't he report her missing until now?"

"He probably went away for the weekend," answered Gibbons. "Anyway, D.I. Parkinson is going round to collect him and bring him here to identify the body. I'm just off to the morgue to warn them—they haven't gotten to the postmortem yet. Do you want to come?"

"Lord no," replied Bethancourt emphatically. "It's bad enough as it is—why should I want to watch some poor chap look at his dead wife's body?"

"Look here, Phillip," said Gibbons briskly. "This isn't your fault. Whether you'd bought a new car

or not, Wally would still have forgotten the keys to whatever car he'd cleaned last, and Jeff's friends would still have talked him into taking it out."

"I know," answered Bethancourt. "But it's all so sordid. It would be bad enough if it had just been an ordinary hit-and-run, but at least then I'd be pleased to think the lout who'd done it was going to get the book thrown at him. But I only feel sorry for Wally Duncan."

"It's rotten luck," agreed Gibbons. "But you need to take your mind off it. When are you going back to Paris?"

"Probably tomorrow," said Bethancourt without much enthusiasm. "Creamer's supposed to ring sometime today and let me know how soon he can get the new car. It's going to take a bit because of it being custom-made."

"Come out with me tonight, then," suggested Gibbons. "We can have a pint at the Feathers and go on to dinner from there."

"All right," agreed Bethancourt. "I will."

He rang off then, and as soon as he had, he realised he hadn't asked the dead woman's name. Well, he could find out from Gibbons this evening, though why it was important to know he could not have said. He still persisted in thinking of the S-Type Jaguar as his own, though in fact he had refused it and would soon have a new car. But he had the nagging feeling that the new car would remind him of the hit-and-run just as surely as the one presently in police custody. After all, it would look exactly the



same. Perhaps he had better order a new colour.

He was just looking out the Jaguar catalogue when the phone rang. Hoping it wasn't Marla, with whom he'd had a rather unpleasant conversation the evening before, he picked it up and was surprised to hear his solicitor's voice.

"Ah, I'm glad I caught you in," said Murchison. "I wanted to consult you about a barrister for Wally Duncan."

"A barrister?" asked Bethancourt, rather confused. "But it's not going to court, surely?"

"Oh, I rather think it will," answered Murchison. "The police don't seem inclined to investigate further, and I've no intention of letting Mr. Duncan take the blame for something he didn't do."

Bethancourt dropped into a chair, completely at a loss. "But he did do it," he said. "Wally himself says he did."

It was Murchison's turn to sound confused. "But I thought that's why you had brought me in," he said. "Because you believed Mr. Duncan was innocent."

"No," replied Bethancourt. "I brought you in because I felt sorry for the poor wretch. Are you telling me he didn't kill the woman after all?"

"I don't believe he did, no," answered Murchison slowly. "I believe she was struck down by another driver, and Mr. Duncan simply ran over the body."

Bethancourt frowned. "Did Wally say that?"

"No, of course not. He thought he'd killed her, just as he told the

police. Mr. Bethancourt, could you hold for a moment?"

"Certainly," Bethancourt answered automatically while his mind raced. He could not imagine how Murchison had arrived at this astonishing conclusion.

In another moment, the solicitor was back on the line.

"Mr. Bethancourt? Perhaps you'd like to come down and speak to Mr. Duncan yourself. Both he and his brother are with me now. It's rather unusual, but my client's brother has no objection, and since you're paying my fee . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Bethancourt. "I think that would be an excellent idea. I'll come directly."

By the time he arrived at Lincoln's Inn, he had already created and discarded several scenarios in which Wally had somehow suddenly realised that he hadn't knocked down the victim after all. He really could not imagine how it had come about, and in the back of his brain there was a suspicion that Jeff Duncan had concocted a story for Murchison's benefit.

Jeff looked very excited when Bethancourt was ushered in and nodded his head in respectful greeting. Wally too looked happy, if somewhat confused. His attention, however, was immediately diverted by the sight of Cerberus.

"What a beauty," he said admiringly. "Can I pet him, Mr. Bethancourt?"

"By all means," said Bethancourt, throwing himself into the chair Murchison drew up for him. "Now what's this all about?"

"About a dog as it happens," an-



swered Murchison, casting an amused glance at Cerberus and the infatuated Wally. "Let me begin at the beginning. Since it was Saturday when you rang, I contented myself with removing Mr. Duncan from police custody without further looking into the matter. I made an appointment with him and his brother, however, for this morning to go into the affair in depth. They both told me the same story I'd heard from the police, and I was simply endeavouring to get a few more details. I asked Mr. Duncan why he had thought the woman was dead when he examined her. Perhaps, Mr. Duncan, you would be good enough to tell Mr. Bethancourt what you told me. . . . Mr. Duncan?"

Wally, still engrossed in Cerberus, appeared not to have heard.

"Wally!" said his brother urgently. "Stop playing with the dog now and answer Mr. Murchison. Tell Mr. Bethancourt how you knew the lady was dead." He threw an apologetic look at Bethancourt, who waved it away.

Wally removed his gaze from the Borzoi and appeared to think deeply for a moment. "Because she was cold, like Mabel," he said at last.

"Splendid," said Bethancourt, raising an eyebrow. "I take it Mabel was also dead?"

"Mabel," interjected Jeff, "was our dog. She got out of the yard while we were at work about six months ago and was hit by a car."

"And I wanted to take her to the vet," said Wally eagerly, "only you told me, Jeff, there wasn't no need because she was already dead, re-

member? You showed me how cold she was and how there wasn't any pulse in her neck."

"That's right, Wally," Jeff looked at Bethancourt.

"So when you found the woman in the road," said Bethancourt, "you touched her to see if there was a pulse? And was she cold, like your dog had been?"

"Yes, sir."

"You see," said Murchison. "She couldn't have been cold if Mr. Duncan had only just knocked her down."

"No," agreed Bethancourt. He turned his eyes thoughtfully to Jeff. That there had been a dead dog, he didn't doubt. But he still wondered if Jeff had remembered that and coached his brother to say the dead woman had been cold. Unless there were a witness, an unidentified hit-and-run driver would be almost impossible to find.

Bethancourt pushed up his sleeve and held out his arm. "Just put your hand on my arm here," he said. "Was that how the woman felt?"

Wally obeyed, but shook his head at once. "No, sir," he answered. "She was cold, really cold. She didn't feel any warmer than the street pavement."

Bethancourt nodded and leant back. He glanced at Murchison. "Have you told the police this?"

"I've told the prosecutor that I believe the victim was already dead and lying in the road when Mr. Duncan came along," answered Murchison. "He in turn spoke to the detective in charge, but this person appears sure of his case."



"Yes, he would," murmured Bethancourt. "Mr. Murchison, if I could have a word in private?"

"Of course." Murchison rang for his clerk. "If you gentlemen wouldn't mind sitting in the waiting room for a few minutes? Mr. Baker will get you some tea."

The brothers were ushered out, and once the mahogany door was firmly closed behind them, Bethancourt turned to his solicitor and said bluntly, "How sure are you that this is the truth? Because it might have occurred to Jeff to prime Wally with the dog story."

Murchison shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered. "Mr. Duncan—that is, the elder Mr. Duncan—seemed as surprised as I when his brother began talking about their dog. He was embarrassed, actually. Besides, it all fits. Mr. Duncan has said several times that he felt the car go over something, not that he felt it hit anything. And he is adamant that he did not see the woman at all."

"Yes," said Bethancourt, thinking back. "That's what he said to me, too. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time. It was dark, he was upset, and she probably stepped out in front of him at the last moment. That's what I thought. But you're right—every time he's described what happened, he's said he felt the car go over something. And she was wearing a white shirt—it is odd that he wouldn't have seen her at all."

"So I concluded."

Bethancourt lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

"D.I. Parkinson," he said, "is over-

worked like any police detective and probably can't bear the thought of reopening an open-and-shut case."

"D.I. Parkinson," said Murchison dryly, "doesn't think Mr. Duncan's testimony is to be relied upon. Or so the prosecutor gave me to understand. In his opinion, Mr. Duncan is so backward it's remarkable that he even noticed there *was* a dead body."

"Yes, well, he's relying on Wally's testimony for that, isn't he?" said Bethancourt.

"He does have a point," said Murchison, "which is why I wished to consult a barrister. Someone like that would have a much better idea how effective Mr. Duncan would be in the witness box than I have."

"By all means," said Bethancourt. "Hire whatever barrister you think best. I'll pay. But I want to put my friend D.I. Gibbons onto this. I don't suppose there's much chance of catching the real killer, but I don't like the thought that no one's even trying."

"And I don't like the thought that the police will be privy to our defense," said Murchison. "I should prefer—and I'm certain any barrister I brief will as well—that the prosecutor not be aware of every detail and primed with awkward questions about dead dogs."

"Gibbons is all right," said Bethancourt. "He's with Scotland Yard, and if anyone can clear this mess up, he can." He caught Murchison's severe eye. "But I'll make sure he doesn't say anything to Parkinson about Mabel."

"I can't stop you," said Murchi-



son, "but I think it unwise. Unwise in the extreme."

"I'm sorry," said Bethancourt. "But I can't not try. I'll keep Wally's interests in mind; never fear."

Donald Michaels was a thin, dark-haired young man with a hurt and bewildered look on his face. He stood staring down at his dead wife's face for a long time, as if willing his eyes to see some other truth. But at last he whispered, "Yes, that's her. That's Christina."

"Thank you, sir," said Gibbons, expertly guiding Michaels' footsteps as he turned away. Gibbons hated this part—all policemen did—but there was no question he had gotten good at it over the years. "We're very sorry to subject you to such a distressing experience." At least, he thought, this was one bereaved relation he would not have to ask hard questions of.

Parkinson, on Michaels' other side, had a fixed expression of sympathy on his face, but his eyes revealed he was thinking the same thing.

"If you'll just come this way, sir."

"But I don't understand," said Michaels brokenly. He cast an irresolute glance over his shoulder at the morgue attendant, who had moved in and was drawing the sheet back over the head. "How—how did this happen?"

It was not a request for facts, but facts were the only answer they had. "It was an accident, sir, as I told you," said Parkinson. "I know it's a terrible shock."

"Yes, you did say," muttered Michaels, allowing himself to be led

forward. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm being rather stupid."

"Not at all," said Gibbons soothingly. "You just need a moment to collect yourself. Come sit in here."

They brought him a cup of tea, although a stiff drink would obviously have been better; in any case, he barely tasted it.

"Do you know how it happened?" he asked.

"We believe she was struck while crossing the street," said Parkinson gently, although he had already explained the circumstances when he had informed Michaels his wife might be dead. He understood that Michaels needed to have it explained again, now that death had been confirmed. "She was found in Pitt Street, in Kensington, late on Friday night."

"Friday," repeated Michaels dully. "Then all weekend, she—"

His voice trailed off and he buried his face in his hands. Over his bowed head, the policemen exchanged weary glances while they waited for him to recover.

At last he drew a deep breath and raised his head, rubbing at his face. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be, sir. We understand how difficult this is. Do you know what your wife was doing in Kensington that night?"

Michaels shook his head. "No. I thought—well, I was wrong. But we don't know anyone in Kensington; I can't think what she would have been doing there."

"And you didn't realise she was missing until this morning?" asked Gibbons.

"No." Michaels' expression was



anguished. "We'd had a row, you see." He swallowed. "We said dreadful things to each other. I stormed out, and when I got back, she was gone. I thought she'd gone to a girlfriend's; she did that once before. I did rather hope," he added forlornly, "that she'd be back the next day, or maybe Sunday, but I wasn't worried. Not until they called from her office this morning—she worked at Sotheby's—wanting to know where she was. It's not like Christina to miss work."

"We're very sorry, sir."

"Will you catch who did it?"

"We're still investigating, but we believe we've got the driver," said Parkinson. "He did try to help her, but it was too late." He exchanged glances with Gibbons, who nodded. Neither of them felt Michaels needed to hear the whole story now.

"Good," said Michaels. "I'm glad you've caught him." He drew another deep breath and sat up straight. "I should go and tell my brother."

"We'll get you a taxi, sir."

They watched him drive off with relief.

"Poor bugger," said Parkinson. "They'd only been married two years, did I tell you that?"

"No," answered Gibbons. "That's tough. And to have had a row the last time he saw her . . ."

"Yes, rotten luck." Parkinson turned back to business. "I was going to look in at the autopsy, but they don't seem to know when they'll get to it."

"They're backed up," said Gibbons. "Monday morning, you know, and there's no hurry about this

case. They might get to it by six or seven, or else wait till tomorrow."

"Well, I can't wait around. I've got five other cases on my desk."

"There won't be much new," said Gibbons. "Just the details."

"Right. Well, thanks, inspector. I'm off."

When Gibbons returned to his desk, he found a message. "Ring Phillip," it said. "Wally didn't do it."

"Bloody hell," said Gibbons, exasperated. He had already lost most of the morning to a case that wasn't even his, and now, just as he had gotten it nicely settled, Bethancourt had to horn in. He jabbed the buttons on the phone viciously.

"What the devil do you mean, 'Wally didn't do it'?" he demanded when Bethancourt answered. "Wally *said* he did it, for God's sake."

"Yes, but he was wrong," replied Bethancourt cheerfully. "He's not too bright, you know."

"Even backward people can hardly make a mistake about whether or not they've run somebody over."

"Exactly," said Bethancourt. "He did run her over, but she was already lying there dead when he did it. We never thought to ask him why he thought she was dead."

"I assumed it was because she wouldn't come round," said Gibbons.

"So did I," admitted Bethancourt. "But that wasn't it. He thought she was dead because he couldn't find a pulse and she was cold. As cold as the pavement, he said."

Gibbons was silent for a moment. "And you think that's true?" he asked. "You think he was collected enough to notice?"





"Yes," said Bethancourt. "He didn't know what to do and he didn't understand that she must have been dead for hours, but he was quite clear about what happened. She was hit by someone else, Jack."

Gibbons sighed. "It does sound like it," he agreed. "Well, it's Parkinson's baby now and I don't want to step on his toes. You'd better have your solicitor—"

"But that's just it," said Bethancourt. "Parkinson refuses to investigate further—he didn't even ask to interview Wally again. As far as he's concerned, the case is closed."

This time Gibbons' sigh was loud and long. "Very well, I'll speak to him. But there's really not much hope even if he does reopen the case. He's already done a house-to-house in Pitt Street, and nobody saw anything. There's nowhere for the investigation to go."

"I know," said Bethancourt. "But I hate the idea of not trying. And there's no reason Wally should stand trial just because we don't know who the real killer is."

"There is that," agreed Gibbons. "All right. I'll get on to Parkinson."

But when he rang off, he did not immediately dial the Earl's Court Road station. Instead, he rose and wandered down to forensics.

Ralph Witherspoon glared at him.

"You know, inspector," he said; "we actually send up reports when we're done. You don't need to keep coming round here."

Gibbons ignored this. "Have you looked at the Jaguar yet?" he asked.

"Yes, we've looked at it, and no,

we haven't finished. If we'd finished, we'd have sent up a report."

"I want an interim report," said Gibbons, who was used to this. "On the front of the car. Did you go over that yet?"

Witherspoon relented with an exaggerated sigh. "It's one of the things we do in hit-and-runs," he said patronizingly. "We've finger-printed, too. There was a lovely one of yours on the passenger door."

"That was before we found the body," said Gibbons. "Come on, Ralph, tell me. What did you find on the front bumper?"

Witherspoon eyed him. "Nothing," he answered.

"Nothing?"

"That's what I said. It was perfectly clean and I mean that literally. So far as I can tell, nothing has touched that fender or the bonnet since the last time the car was washed and waxed. Even the hood ornament was pristine."

"So it didn't kill the victim."

"It's unlikely but not impossible," said Witherspoon. "We haven't started on the victim's clothes yet, so we still might find something. But I've never seen a car involved in a hit-and-run that didn't show some signs of it. On the face of it, I'd say you've got the wrong car."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Gibbons with a sigh. "Thanks, Ralph." He turned away to go and place the call to Parkinson.

"I know I said tomorrow, Marla," said Bethancourt, "but there's a wrinkle in the case, and the police don't want me to leave just yet."

"You don't *want* to leave yet,"



grumbled Marla. "You *want* to investigate this wrinkle."

"Marla," said Bethancourt with an injured air, "when have you ever known me to investigate a hit-and-run? There's nothing to investigate, for heaven's sake. I agree that in this case the rules about witnesses not leaving the country don't make much sense, but there's nothing I can do about it."

There was silence on the other end of the line while Marla tried to find a hole in this reasoning. She was quite sure she was right and that nothing other than his own desires was keeping Bethancourt in England, but she was somehow losing the argument.

"So when *are* you coming?" she asked.

"Oh, probably on Wednesday or Thursday," said Bethancourt confidently. "I'm sure they'll have cleared it all up by then. There's the doorbell—I've got to go now."

"Ring me tomorrow."

"Of course. Talk to you then."

It was Gibbons at the door, wearing a sly expression that Bethancourt couldn't divine the meaning of. He ushered his friend in and poured him a drink.

"Did you talk to Parkinson?" he asked.

"Yes." Gibbons sipped the single malt scotch appreciatively. "He was planning to interview Wally again tomorrow, but I doubt he'll need to now."

"Now?" asked Bethancourt.

"There's been a development," said Gibbons. "It ought to make you much happier."

"The only thing that could make

me happier is if the whole business had never happened," replied Bethancourt. His conversation with Marla had depressed him, and he was beginning to wonder why he was insisting on staying in London to investigate a boring case on which, moreover, he had thus far been no help at all. Nor did he see that his particular talents would ever be called for in a mundane hit-and-run.

"I've just come from the post mortem," continued Gibbons undaunted.

"You're not going to tell me horrible details of what happens to people when they're hit by cars, are you?"

"No, and there's an excellent reason why I'm not. She wasn't killed through being hit by a car."

Bethancourt stared at him.

"She wasn't?" he asked doubtfully.

"Not at all. Oh, she'd been run over, right enough, but that was after she was dead. What killed her was a blow to the back of the head. The doctor thinks there might possibly have been two blows, but he's not sure about that."

"Good heavens," said Bethancourt, taken aback by this news. "So someone murdered her and then had the bright idea of putting her in the road to make it look like a hit-and-run?"

"It certainly looks that way," replied Gibbons. "The doctor says she was killed sometime on Friday night but can't put it any closer than that except that it was after five and probably before one o'clock. But she had a full stomach,



so it couldn't have been long after she'd eaten."

Bethancourt shook his head. "So it's murder after all," he said.

"That it is." Gibbons' eyes narrowed. "The husband certainly appeared grief-stricken this afternoon—I believed him completely—but I've seen acts just as good before. And he admitted to having a row with her on Friday evening. He wants a bit of looking into, does Donald Michaels."

"So that's where we'll start tomorrow?"

"Not at all," replied Gibbons, surprised. "It's Parkinson's case, not mine. I won't be looking into anything. I'll keep abreast of what's happening, though," he added hastily as Bethancourt began to protest. "I'm sorry, Phillip, but that's the best I can do. There's no earthly reason for me to interfere, and Parkinson would be quite rightly offended if I tried."

In view of this, Gibbons was surprised to receive a phone call from Parkinson the next morning.

"I just thought I'd let you know," said Parkinson amiably. "I'm off to interview the husband again. I did the rounds of his neighbours last night, and there's no doubt he and his wife quarrelled on the Friday night. The sound apparently carried wonderfully through the open window and, it being a pleasant evening, there were any number of people out and about who heard parts of it."

"Did you get any idea of what it was about?" asked Gibbons.

"He apparently was accusing her

of infidelity. There was also a lot of talk about his brother, but whether he was the supposed lover or not, I'm not sure. Christina seemed to be accusing Donald of being blind to his brother's faults, which doesn't sound right if she was having an affair with the fellow. It's all a bit garbled, as I got different pieces from different people."

"But you're sure he thought she was being unfaithful?"

"Oh yes. Several people mentioned that."

"Well, there's motive for you."

"It gets better," said Parkinson. "Christina Michaels is the only child of wealthy parents. Donald, on the other hand, only has what he earns as an architect. He's only been with his firm—Federman's—for a couple of years, which doesn't translate into a large salary."

"It sounds picture-perfect," said Gibbons. "Still, nothing's certain until you've looked into it."

"No," agreed Parkinson. "But listen to this: two witnesses say the quarrel ended in violence. He slapped her and then apparently threw something—at any rate, there was a crash like a dish breaking. Shortly after that, he stormed out."

Gibbons whistled. "And did anyone see her leave?"

"No, but that doesn't necessarily mean she was dead. No one was paying attention after the quarrel ended. No one saw him return, either."

"Still, it's suggestive."

Parkinson laughed. "I'm being a bit cautious after Wally Duncan," he said. "I'm taking nothing for



granted. Anyway, I thought you might like to come along and see what Michaels has to say."

Gibbons was surprised. He could not recollect ever having the local C.I.D. welcome Yard interference before.

In fact, Parkinson had made some inquiries and discovered that Detective Inspector Jack Gibbons was Scotland Yard's white-headed boy. He had risen from detective constable to detective sergeant and from there to detective inspector in record time, and no one thought he would be many years older before he made detective chief inspector. Parkinson had several cases on his plate, though none so important as murder, and he'd decided that if he could get help from the Yard's rising star, he would take it.

"That's awfully kind of you, inspector," said Gibbons. "I have to admit to having an interest in the case. It's my friend, you see, whose car the body was found in. He's taking it rather personally."

"I can understand that," said Parkinson. "I wouldn't much like finding a body in my car, either. So shall I stop for you on my way?"

"I'll be waiting downstairs for you," said Gibbons.

Donald Michaels had a flat in a newly renovated mews. Looking at the other buildings across the narrow, cobbled street, Gibbons could appreciate how easily the argument must have been overheard by most of the neighbours.

Their ring was answered by a tall, broad-shouldered man who bore some resemblance to Mi-

chaels, and Gibbons guessed they were facing the brother whose faults Donald Michaels did not recognize and who might or might not have been sleeping with Christina Michaels.

"D.I. Parkinson and D.I. Gibbons," said Parkinson, flashing his badge. "We've come to see Donald Michaels."

"Oh." The man glanced worriedly over his shoulder. "About Christina, right? I suppose it's important?"

"Yes, it is," said Parkinson rather sternly.

"Well, you'd better come in. Only Don's not doing too well. Taking it hard, I mean."

"That's only natural," said Gibbons. "Would you be Mr. Michaels' brother?"

"That's right. I'm Mike Michaels. Come through to the back—Don's in the kitchen."

His brother had evidently been trying to cure Donald's grief with food and drink. Donald sat slumped at a sturdy pine table on which was spread a half-eaten fry-up of eggs, tomatoes, and mushrooms, a plate of doughnuts, two cups of coffee, and a bottle of whisky.

"It's the police, Don," said Mike. "They need to talk to you about Christina. You blokes want some coffee?"

"Thank you, that would be nice," said Gibbons as he and Parkinson seated themselves at the table.

Michaels looked up at them and tried to smile. "I'm glad you've come," he said. "I forgot to ask about getting her body back from you for the funeral."

"Don't worry about it, Don," said

his brother, setting mugs of coffee before the detectives and taking the fourth chair. "I'll get it sorted."

Michaels smiled wanly.

"Now that the P.M.'s finished, the coroner will release her body whenever you like," said Parkinson. "Actually, it's about the P.M. that we've come. I'm afraid we have some upsetting news for you."

Michaels looked incredulous, and Parkinson regretted his choice of words. Obviously, nothing could be classed as upsetting when compared with the death of one's wife.

"As I told you," continued Parkinson, "your wife was found in the street by a driver who had run over her. We all assumed that he had killed her, but in fact the autopsy shows that she had already been dead for several hours."

Michaels stared at them, bewildered, but his brother frowned and said, "You mean some other bloke had run her down earlier?"

"Not exactly," said Parkinson. "In fact, she was killed by a blow to the back of the head." When Michaels continued to look confused, he added, "She was murdered, Mr. Michaels, and her body left in the street."

Both brothers stared at them, stunned. "Murdered?" repeated Donald at last. "But that makes no sense. Why should anyone want to kill Christina?" He looked toward his brother as if he could answer the question.

But Mike Michaels only frowned and scratched his head. "It doesn't make sense," he agreed. "Christina was a great person—everyone liked her."

Parkinson was watching Donald. "Could you tell us what you quarreled about?" he asked.

Donald flushed. "Oh, that," he said. "It was a stupid argument. I—I'd gotten the wrong idea about something, that's all."

"In fact, didn't you believe she was having an affair?"

Donald's flush turned crimson. "I did have some idea about that," he admitted. "But I was wrong—completely wrong. I can't believe that's the last thing I said to her, that she died thinking I believed that."

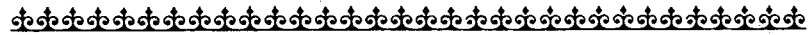
"You were a silly git," growled his brother, but there was a fond note in his voice. "Look here, inspector, I'll tell you about it. It was me Don thought Christina was having it on with." He gave his brother a scornful glance. "As if I would."

"But surely he had some reason for this suspicion?"

"If you can call it that," said Mike. "It happened like this: one of my RAF mates—we were both pilots, and he got out a couple of years before me—well, he's opened a sort of antiques shop in Fulham and I've been sharing the flat above it with him. A week or two ago Andy got hold of some old blueprints for a country manor. Don's birthday is coming up, and I thought it might make a good present for him, so I asked Christina to come and vet them. You know she worked for Sotheby's?"

Parkinson nodded. "Yes, we know."

"Well, she said she'd come along after work since Don was staying late at his office that night. Only



when she went home to change before coming round, she found Don there. She couldn't tell him she was going to meet me or he'd have wanted to come, too, so she lied and said she'd made a date with a girlfriend. But after she'd gone, Don had the bright idea that he'd pay me a visit, and when he got to the shop, he saw me letting Christina in."

"I was an idiot," muttered Donald. "It's just—well, Mike's always had women after him and you can judge for yourself which of us is better-looking. And Christina had never really got to know him until a few months ago; when we were married, Mike was still with the RAF, stationed overseas. And I couldn't think why else she would lie to me about meeting him."

"So you thought after your row Friday night that she'd gone to Mike."

Donald nodded. "Yes. That's why I didn't try to find her when she didn't come home all weekend."

"But knowing now that she wasn't with your brother, you still have no idea where she might have gone?"

"No. I thought she might have gone to Agnes Millbank's, but Agnes says she never heard from her."

"I see. And where did you go when you left here?"

"To the pub. I didn't know what to do with myself. I'm afraid I was pretty drunk when I got home."

Parkinson smiled sympathetically. "Stayed till closing, did you?"

"Till they called time, yes."

Mike Michaels was looking at Parkinson narrowly, but before he

could object to this line of questioning, Parkinson brought the interview to a close.

"You'll let me know, then?" asked Donald as they rose to leave. "When you find out who did this, I mean?"

"We'll keep you abreast of developments, sir," said Parkinson blandly. "Once again, our condolences."

Gibbons waited until the door was closed behind them and they had proceeded several yards up the lane. "That's shaping nicely," he said then.

"Very nicely," agreed Parkinson. "There's the pub—we might as well check his story, though I've no doubt he did spend the evening there, waiting until it was late enough to move the body. Would you care for a pint, inspector?"

Gibbons smiled. "Thank you, inspector. It would be just the thing."

The pub was just opening, and behind the bar the landlord was slurping coffee with heavy lids. After some thought and a consultation with his wife, they agreed that Donald Michaels had been at the pub for most of Friday evening. They couldn't swear he hadn't left at all, but he had certainly been there at closing time, rather the worse for the seven or eight pints they estimated he had consumed.

"It's nice when things are simple like that," remarked Parkinson as he and Gibbons took their beers off to a corner table.

"Will you go on to Sotheby's now?" asked Gibbons.

"A word with Agnes Millbank does seem in order," agreed Parkinson. "And I'd like to speak to Michaels' co-workers at Federman's."



He cast an appraising glance at Gibbons. "I expect you've got to get back to the Yard."

"It's still early," answered Gibbons, resolutely ignoring thoughts of the mountain of paperwork he had left on his desk. "I could do one of the interviews, if you'd like."

"It would be a help," said Parkinson, pleased. "If you'd take Agnes, I'll go round to Federman's and see if our Donald has made any friends there. We can meet up later and compare notes."

"Here's to it, then."

"Ta."

Gibbons, however, did not proceed directly to Sotheby's upon leaving the pub. He saw Parkinson on his way and then paused at the entrance to the tube and pulled out his mobile phone.

"Hullo?" came Bethancourt's voice.

"Parkinson's letting me have a look in after all," said Gibbons. "I'm off to Sotheby's to interview Christina Michaels' best friend. Do you want to come?"

"Yes," said Bethancourt, "I do. I'll meet you there."

As he walked up the street, Gibbons saw Bethancourt waiting at the corner, Cerberus sitting sedately by his side.

"You'd best fill me in before we go inside," Bethancourt said.

"It's simple enough," said Gibbons. "Donald thought his wife was having an affair with his brother—that's what the row was about. Half the street heard them, since their bedroom window was open and lots of people were on their way home

from work. Two of the witnesses claim he slapped her at the end and then threw something. He stormed out after that and spent the evening at his local, probably waiting until it was late enough to move the body without being seen."

Bethancourt was frowning. "Then they would have had the row as soon as they were both home from work?"

"That's right."

"But he can't have killed her then, you know," said Bethancourt.

Gibbons was surprised. "No? And how do you make that out?"

"Because her stomach was full when she died," replied Bethancourt. "If the argument happened as soon as they'd got home from work, she hadn't time to eat her dinner."

"You're right," said Gibbons thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten that. So she must have made herself a meal, or gone out for it, and been there when Donald got home from the pub. That fits in just as well; he was probably still angry and drunk on top of it."

"Do you think she really was sleeping with her brother-in-law?"

"I'm not sure," answered Gibbons. "Donald's now convinced he was wrong, but the brother's story sounded a bit too glib to me. Donald says he began to suspect the affair a week or so ago when he happened to see them together after she'd told him she was having drinks with a friend. But if you think you have a happy marriage, that's not enough to set you off."

"Perhaps the marriage wasn't happy," said Bethancourt. "If they



were having problems, he might have leapt at the idea that an affair was at the bottom of it all, rather than his own shortcomings."

"Or she might indeed have been having a bit on the side. Well, let's see what her friend has to say."

Agnes Millbank had a halo of golden hair that seemed to be trying to go in several different directions at once and deep blue eyes that twinkled even when her expression was grave.

"Poor Chris," she said. "I still can't quite believe she's dead."

"You were close?"

"Oh yes. We started at Sotheby's at about the same time and got to be friends pretty quickly. I was maid of honour at her wedding."

"And would you say her marriage was a happy one?"

Agnes looked slightly surprised. "Quite happy," she replied, "Chris and Don did very well together. Of course it was early days yet, but there was no trouble on the horizon that I could see."

Bethancourt and Gibbons exchanged glances.

"So she wasn't having an affair?"

"Good heavens, no. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Her husband," replied Gibbons. "He apparently had the notion that she was sleeping with his brother."

"With Mike?" Agnes looked blank for a moment and then burst into laughter. "But Mike would have been the very last person," she said. "Christina couldn't stand him."

"Really? And why was that?"

"Well, I suppose it wasn't really anything about Mike that she objected to. It was Don's attitude to-

ward him that drove her round the bend. Mike can do no wrong where Don's concerned, you see, and Christina got very tired of having him held up as some sort of saint. Even when Mike behaved badly, Don always had an excuse for him."

"That's a little surprising," said Gibbons frankly. "I got the impression this morning that Mike Michaels thought highly of Christina."

"Oh, I'm sure she never let on to him how she felt," said Agnes. "Christina was a very reserved person in some ways—she was good at hiding her emotions when she wanted to." She put her head on one side and regarded him quizzically. "Why are you asking all this, anyway? I didn't think Scotland Yard investigated hit-and-runs."

"I'm helping out a colleague," replied Gibbons. "And I'm afraid it wasn't a hit-and-run accident."

Her blue eyes widened. "But that's what Don told me," she protested. "I'm quite sure that's what he said."

"No doubt," said Gibbons. "We thought so at first, but the autopsy has changed the situation. Christina Michaels was murdered."

Her eyes widened even further, and she said nothing for several minutes.

"I see," she said at last. "But I truly don't think Don—"

"He believed she was sleeping with his own brother," said Gibbons evenly.

She grappled with this in silence for a moment and then burst out, "But it's so ridiculous. How could he think that? There's no sense in it."



"He saw them together when Christina had said she was elsewhere," said Gibbons. "Presumably before that, he'd had some reason to think his marriage was not as sound as it had been. Yet you tell me Christina was happy."

"She was," said Agnes firmly. "Perfectly happy. We were close—I don't say she told me every last thing, but if she'd been unhappy with Don, or having an affair, I'd have known."

"And she seemed just as usual to you in the last fortnight or so?"

Agnes started to reply in the affirmative but paused. "She was a little preoccupied with something," she admitted. "Once or twice I thought she was going to ask me or tell me something, but then she'd shrug it off. But I never thought it was anything serious. If she hadn't died, I would have thought nothing of it." Her expression now was troubled. "Do you really think Don killed her? He loved her, I'm sure of that."

"He might have killed her because he loved her," said Gibbons gently. "But as you said, it's early days with this, too—nothing's certain."

At Federman's, Parkinson was having a very different sort of conversation with Lester Morris, who had been at university with Donald Michaels and had gotten a job at Federman's just a year before Michaels signed on.

"He was awfully worried Christina was going off him," said Morris glumly. "The last week or so, he was really upset about it—said he

thought she was having an affair. I didn't see it, myself."

"What do you mean?" asked Parkinson.

"Well, they'd always been the perfect picture of wedded bliss," explained Morris, "and I just didn't see how it could turn that fast. How could she have met someone else when she was besotted over Don?"

"So you thought the trouble was likely to be something different?"

"That's right. Maybe he had done something to make her angry, and she was giving him the cold shoulder about it. Women do that, you know," he added darkly. "They never just tell you what's the matter."

Parkinson suppressed a smile. "Just so. Mr. Michaels never told you who he thought his wife might be seeing?"

"No, it was all very vague. I swear to God, inspector, whatever he thought, I never had the least idea he might kill her."

Morris looked distressed, as if he might have prevented the death if he had only realised in time.

"I doubt he meant to," said Parkinson. "It probably happened in the heat of a moment. Well, thank you for your help, Mr. Morris. I know this has been difficult for you."

"It sounds to me," said Gibbons that evening as he leaned back in one of Bethancourt's easy chairs and sipped gratefully at a glass of Lagavulin, "as though Michaels had gone off his nut. Stress, perhaps."

"Maybe he was just so afraid of losing her he built up a fantasy in his mind," offered Bethancourt.



"Well, I call that going mad," said Gibbons. "Anyway, Parkinson will let me know what he gets out of him tonight." He frowned at the amber liquid in his glass. "Michaels is grief-stricken—I don't think it's all an act. It could be that Parkinson will get a confession out of him."

"And if he doesn't?" asked Bethancourt.

"Well, then we'll have to hope that forensics comes up with something. The row took place in the bedroom, so they're going over that with a fine-toothed comb. There wasn't a great deal of blood, but there was enough that they ought to find traces of it. And then of course there's the car. He had to use that to move her to Kensington."

"I didn't know they had a car."

"It's registered in her name," said Gibbons, "a white Saab that they keep parked in the mews. He was lucky there—no one saw him driving it, either going or returning."

"If he was as drunk as the landlord at the pub says, he was lucky in more ways than one."

"True."

Bethancourt lit a cigarette. "The timing's rather tight," he said. "If Michaels didn't leave the pub until closing, that gives him hardly any time to get home, kill his wife, and get her body over to Pitt Street in time for Wally to run over it."

"We're not exactly sure when Wally did run over it," said Gibbons. "His brother's mates picked him up at his house around ten, but then they had to talk Wally into taking your car out, get to Creamer's dealership, drive a bit,

have a row, and have Wally kick them out. It might have been closer to one than midnight."

"Stretching it a bit, that," said Bethancourt dubiously.

"Well, yes, but even midnight still works. Look at it this way: Michaels has had a tremendous row with his wife and goes off to drown his sorrows, getting angrier with every pint. He goes home and it starts up again, but this time he's on a hair-trigger and proceeds to violence almost at once. Perhaps she tried to leave and he threw something at her again, only this time it hits and kills her. She could have been dead within ten or fifteen minutes of his walking in the door."

"Leaving him an ample forty-five minutes to think of what to do, get her body down to the car, and drive her over to Kensington," said Bethancourt. "I still say it's a bit tight. And would she really have been as cold as Wally says she was in just an hour?"

"It was a chilly night," said Gibbons, "and she was lying in the street. She might have felt cold to the touch." He considered. "On the other hand," he said, "we've no evidence that Donald was in the pub the entire night. He was there earlier and at closing, but he might have gone back to the flat, killed his wife, and then returned to the pub with the idea of giving himself an alibi."

"I didn't realise that," said Bethancourt. "I thought his time was completely accounted for."

"No, not quite." Gibbons drained his glass. "But it might have happened some other way. We'll have to



wait and see what he tells Parkinson.

"I would never have hurt Christina!"

Donald Michaels looked miserable—fatigued, grief-stricken, and desperate.

"Come now, Mr. Michaels," said Parkinson easily. "Isn't it true you had already slapped her that evening?"

Michaels stared at him wild-eyed for a moment and then began to laugh in a manner Parkinson did not like at all; he wondered if his prime suspect were about to lose his mind altogether. But in another moment Michaels had recovered himself and, shaking his head, said, "I didn't slap her, inspector. She slapped me."

Parkinson was taken aback; this interpretation had never occurred to him. Before he could say anything, however, Michaels was going on, almost as if he were eager to explain.

"I'll tell you all about it," he said. "I've already told you how I mistook what was happening between Christina and Mike."

"Yes," said Parkinson. "On evidence that wouldn't hang a dog, you instantly concluded they were having an affair."

"It wasn't just that," said Michaels defensively. "I'd known for days that she was keeping something from me. I tried to talk to her about it, but she just shrugged it off, said it was nothing. So when I saw her with Mike . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"You jumped to conclusions," sup-

plied Parkinson. "But you didn't confront her with your suspicions?"

"Not until that night," he answered. "I didn't know what to do. Then on Thursday I had to work late again, and the whole time I was there, I kept wondering if she'd snuck out to meet Mike again, kept imagining . . . well, all sorts of things. When I got home and found her watching the telly, I'd worked myself into such a state I just told her I was tired and went to bed. I couldn't bear to go into it all just then, you see."

"Yes," said Parkinson, who in spite of himself felt a little sorry for his suspect.

"Then on Friday, I had an idea. I rang Christina and told her I had to work late again. I didn't really, of course."

"You set a trap for her," said Parkinson.

Michaels looked ashamed of himself. "Yes, I did. I had almost convinced myself that it would be all right, that she would just be sitting at home waiting for me. But when I got there, she was changing and said she'd promised to meet Agnes for a drink. It was just what she'd said before, you see, when she'd gone to meet Mike, and I lost it. I told her I knew she was sleeping with him."

"And she denied it?"

"Yes. I never thought she would if I confronted her—I thought she'd admit it. But of course she didn't. She was furious, and we started yelling at each other. She said some awful things about Mike and that just made me angrier. I said some really filthy things to her then, and



that's when she slapped me. I pushed her back, and she did trip and hit her head on the bedpost, but she was still alive! She didn't even pass out. She got right back up, picked up her water glass, and chucked it at me. That's when I stormed out."

He looked pleadingly at Parkinson through tear-filled eyes as if willing him to believe the story, but the detective's expression remained neutral.

"And when you returned from the pub?"

Michaels spread his hands. "She was gone," he said. "I had a couple more drinks and then passed out. I thought she'd left me for good, you see." The tears had spilled over and were running freely down his cheeks. "I can't stand to think those were the last words I said to her," he added.

Parkinson took a sip of water and began to go over it all again, but by the end of the evening he had still not elicited a confession.

The leaping silver Jaguar had become a mottled grey and gleamed no more. Gibbons ran his eye over the once-shining bonnet, its silver-green colour now dulled by long smudges of fingerprint powder, and peered in at the windows to look at the leather upholstery, also liberally smeared with grey.

"I thought I asked you to clean it up," he said.

Ralph Witherspoon looked surprised. "We did," he answered. "We wiped it all down once we were done."

It was true, Gibbons supposed, that there were no longer any detectable fingerprints apparent. He sighed. "I meant," he said, "that you should take it down to the motor pool and have them wash it."

"Oh." This simple solution had apparently never occurred to Witherspoon. "Well, you should have said so, then."

"Never mind," said Gibbons. "I'll do it now." He raised his eyes from the once sleek and shining Jaguar and looked across to where three people were working on a white Saab.

"That's Christina Michaels' car?" he asked.

Witherspoon nodded. "That's right. We've done the boot, but there's nothing there—not so much as a suspicious hair. We're starting on the back seat now."

"Odd," said Gibbons. "You'd have thought he'd have put her in the boot. Or maybe he used some other car. I wonder if his brother's got one."

Witherspoon looked annoyed. "I hope to bloody hell he didn't," he said. "I've got to say, inspector, that I'm getting a bit tired of your wasting my time with a lot of cars that have nothing to do with crimes."

Gibbons only grinned at him, unrepentant. "All in a day's work," he said cheerfully. "I'll take the Jaguar now."

The lads at the motor pool did a good job, and when Gibbons returned at the end of the day, the grey-green body gleamed as it had when he first saw it. The new car smell was gone, and there was still a faint stain in the boot where the





blood matted in Christina's hair had pressed into the carpet, but all in all, it was as good as could be expected.

Bethancourt, when he ushered Gibbons into his flat, seemed indifferent to the return of his new car.

"I'm sorry, Jack," he said. "I thought I'd told you. Creamer is ordering me a new car—this one should have been returned to him. But never mind. I'll take it over myself tomorrow."

Gibbons hesitated. "Are you sure? I could take it round now."

"No, no. I'll do it. Come on in and have a drink. What have you heard from Parkinson?"

"No joy there," replied Gibbons. "He didn't get a confession, and forensics has come up empty as well. They did find traces of blood in the kitchen, but it was old and not enough to account for a head injury."

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "Really?" he asked. "Do you think we've got hold of the wrong man yet again?"

"Parkinson doesn't," said Gibbons evasively, dropping into a chair and taking the glass Bethancourt held out to him.

"No? What did he get out of Michaels?"

Gibbons related the conversation Parkinson had described to him. When he finished, Bethancourt looked thoughtful. "I think I see what's troubling you," he said, although Gibbons had done his best to remain neutral in his recounting. "I take it Parkinson isn't making any effort to find out where Christina was going?"

"No," said Gibbons. "I'm not sure," he added, "that he even realises it's a problem. Of course, Michaels could be lying. Maybe she never said she was going out at all."

"But it's such an odd thing for him to throw into his story. Why not just say he came home, having screwed his courage to the sticking point, and confronted her? It's not as if he's trying to capitalize on her plans for the evening in order to lead us away from himself."

"That's what I thought," said Gibbons.

"Well, let's think it out," said Bethancourt. "There are only three possibilities. First, she was indeed going to meet Agnes Millbank, and Agnes killed her. Second, she was meeting Mike Michaels as Donald suspected, and Mike killed her. Third, she was going to meet someone we don't know about."

"Then there's motive," said Gibbons, and they both paused.

"Well, heaven knows Donald's the favorite in that race," said Bethancourt. "His own brother, for God's sake."

"And he might be lying," said Gibbons. "I remember a fellow we had up for burglary a few years ago—he was a wonderful liar, and what made him so convincing was all the little details he threw in. And they were all impossible to check, just like Donald's story about Christina saying she was going out."

"It might not be completely impossible," said Bethancourt. "We can at least find out whether Agnes and Mike have alibis or not. Finish your drink, and we'll push round to Sotheby's."



Agnes Millbank had not heard of Donald's arrest and was upset to learn of it.

"I can't believe it," she said, shaking her head.

"Donald said in his statement that when he got home, his wife informed him that she was meeting you for drinks," said Gibbons. "Was that true?"

Agnes looked surprised. "No," she answered. "Of course not. If she had been, I would have rung when she didn't turn up, and we would have realised she was missing earlier."

"Did she mention any plans to you?"

"No." Agnes paused, thinking back. "No, all I remember is that she had skipped lunch that day and said she was going to have an early dinner since Donald wouldn't be home till late."

"In fact, she had eaten dinner before she was killed," said Bethancourt. "Would she have cooked something, do you think, or gone out?"

"Oh, she wouldn't have cooked for just herself," said Agnes with assurance. "Chris only liked cooking for other people. If Donald wasn't going to be there, she would have ordered take-away. Or," she added, thinking it over, "if she was going out as Donald says, she might have gone to a restaurant. There are a couple of little places near their flat that she liked."

"Do you know which ones?" Gibbons produced his notebook.

She gave him the names of two, one Italian and one Indian, and he jotted them down.

"And yourself, Miss Millbank?"

he asked. "What did you do that evening?"

"I had a date," she answered with a wry smile. "Not a very good one. We went for drinks to a horrible little wine bar and didn't really seem to get on very well when we weren't talking about antiques."

She gave them the name and number of her date readily enough when Gibbons asked, and then looked at him hopefully.

"If you're asking about me," she said eagerly, "does that mean you're not sure Donald did it?"

"I think he probably did," replied Gibbons gently, "but we haven't yet dotted all our i's, so to speak. Thank you for your help, Miss Millbank."

Outside, Bethancourt let Cerberus lead him toward a lamppost as he said, "Drinks isn't much of an alibi. She'd still have the rest of the evening free."

"But she'd have no reason to think Christina was still alone," said Gibbons. "Donald might have come home from work."

Bethancourt waved this away. "She probably rang to tell Christina about her horrible date," he said. "Shall we check out those restaurants next, or see Mike Michaels?"

"The restaurants, I think," answered Gibbons. "If we can track her down there, at least that will be something tangible."

It was tangible indeed. The owner of the Italian restaurant knew the Michaelses well; they came in frequently or ordered take-away. He had no trouble remembering that Christina had been in alone for an early dinner. Linguini with clams, she had ordered. He was not

exactly sure of the day, but it had been either Friday or Saturday, before the crowds. At around six or half-past, he thought.

Since Christina could not possibly have been there on Saturday, that tied it up very nicely.

"And she was going somewhere," said Bethancourt. "Agnes said she'd have had take-away otherwise."

"But Agnes is going by what Christina usually did," objected Gibbons. "She didn't usually have violent rows with her husband. She might have just wanted to get out of the flat for a bit in case he came back."

"True," admitted Bethancourt reluctantly. "But she might equally have been on her way to see Mike."

"Yes," said Gibbons slowly. "But Agnes seemed very sure that Christina wasn't having an affair with Mike. Just the opposite, in fact."

"It's not unknown," said Bethancourt mildly, "for people to conceal an illicit love with pretended dislike. In fact, it's as common as mud." He looked around. "The pub's just around that corner," he said, "and she'd have had to go that way either to get a taxi or the tube. It's possible that Donald saw her."

"Well, he couldn't have hit her over the head on the street," said Gibbons. "Someone would have noticed."

"But he might have run out to speak to her," said Bethancourt, "and she, seeing how drunk he was, might have persuaded him to go back to the flat. The landlord of the pub wasn't sure that Donald was there the whole time."

"It's always been a possibility that Donald left the pub and then returned," said Gibbons. "Come along. Let's get on to Mike Michaels and see what he says about his sister-in-law when his brother isn't sitting right next to him."

They saw Mike Michaels in the street as their taxi approached, putting up the shutters on the shop windows. He was not pleased to see them. "Fine detectives you are," he grumbled. "Don would never have killed Christina, and you ought to see that. I'll wager no one's told you any different, have they?"

"You must be very close to him to be so sure," said Gibbons, undaunted by this reception.

"I should think I am. He's my brother, isn't he?"

"But until the last few months, you've been away most of the time, haven't you?" said Gibbons. "The RAF, I think you said."

"That's right. But I kept in touch. Don hadn't changed any—he's always been a good sort. Decent, law-abiding. He hasn't got a temper, never did have."

"Not even when he found out his wife was sleeping with his brother? I should have thought that would bring out a bit of temper in anyone." Mike looked irritated. "That's bunk. I'd never have touched her. I still don't see how Don could think I ever would. It's unnatural."

"Not so unnatural from Don's point of view," put in Bethancourt. "He hero-worships you, you know. In his eyes, you're perfect. And so was Christina. What could be more natural than that the two of you should fall in love with each other?"



Mike turned this thought over, frowning. "Me, perfect?" he said at last with a snort. "Don's not that big a chump. And even if he were, that doesn't mean I would ever have touched his wife."

"So she wasn't coming to see you that night?" asked Gibbons.

"Of course not. Why would she?"

Gibbons leaned comfortably up against the door frame. "Well, you see, she told Donald she was going out to see Agnes Millbank. But she wasn't—Agnes had a date. And the only other time she had lied to Donald about where she was going was when she came here to see you. If Donald killed her, he might be lying about what she said. But if he's innocent, as you claim, then she lied to him again. It's not much of a stretch to imagine it was for the same reason."

"Well, it wasn't."

"Ah. So you believe that in the space of a week, a woman who was normally honest with her husband had two separate reasons to lie to him."

"How the hell should I know what reasons she had?" demanded Mike, exasperated. "I only know she didn't come here. She had no reason to."

"Were you here yourself?"

Mike hesitated. "No," he answered. "I was at the pub with Andy."

"Andy?"

"Andy Mason. The fellow who owns the shop."

"I see. Is he here now?"

"No, he's gone for the night. I told him I'd lock up."

But the way his eyes darted to

the shop door and back made Gibbons believe he was lying. And why should he lie if Andy could indeed provide him with an alibi? Like a hound who has caught the scent, alertness crept into Gibbons' stance and he shifted away from the door frame.

Mike caught the small movement. "Here," he said roughly, "come in and see for yourself."

He jerked the door open and went in first himself, moving quickly. The lights had been turned off, and with the shutters up it was dim in the shop. Bethancourt brought Cerberus to heel and then paused to let his eyes adjust. The shop was full of a hodgepodge of furniture from various periods, with glassware and ceramics piled on top. In the gloom he could not tell if any of it was genuine.

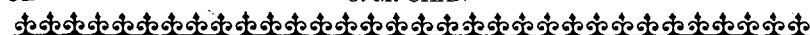
Mike was making for a door behind the counter—light streamed out as he opened it. Gibbons and Bethancourt moved forward only to have the door slammed shut again before they could reach it. For an instant they stared at each other with incomprehension. Then Gibbons frowned.

"He can't be making a run for it," he muttered, hurrying on. But the door was locked when he tried it.

"Michaels!" he shouted.

Bewildered by this turn of events, Bethancourt stopped at the edge of the counter and watched while Gibbons pounded on the door and shouted again, to no avail.

"He *is* making a run for it," said Gibbons, turning back from the door. His tone was both incredulous and annoyed.



"But why should he?" asked Bethancourt. "A fool could see we hadn't anything on him."

Gibbons raised an eyebrow. "Apparently he's a fool," he said. "Let's see if we can catch him round the back."

But just as they were making their way back to the front door, they heard the noise of a gate being pulled across it from outside and the rattle of a padlock.

"What does he imagine he's playing at?" said Gibbons, pulling his mobile from his pocket.

"Giving himself a head start, no doubt," said Bethancourt. "Didn't you say he was a pilot? He's probably got a plane stashed away at some little airfield."

"Good thinking," said Gibbons, dialing. "No doubt his brother knows where it is."

While Gibbons gave orders over the phone, Bethancourt wandered back to the counter and searched until he found a light switch. He flicked it on and surveyed their surroundings.

"Good heavens," he said mildly. "Most of this stuff is pure junk."

Gibbons, still engaged in his phone call, did not answer. Bethancourt let Cerberus off the lead and then settled himself on a very poor reproduction of a Hepplewhite dining chair, leaning back and lighting a cigarette. Above him came the sounds of heavy, hurried footsteps. Gibbons heard them, too. "He's still here at the moment," he said into the phone. "I can hear him upstairs—and very likely his flatmate as well. If you get a move on, you can probably head them off."

The sound of the footsteps ceased just a few moments before Gibbons rang off and moved to join his friend. "They're on it," he said. "Anderson will ring back when there's anything to report. And he'll call the local uniforms and have them come let us out." He shook his head. "I still don't understand it," he said. "Do you know, I quite believed Mike when he told us he wasn't having an affair with Christina."

"So did I," agreed Bethancourt. "In fact, I thought we'd got the wrong dog by the tail."

"But he must have killed her after all," said Gibbons, frowning. "Unless this is all a stunt to put us off his brother."

"No," said Bethancourt, "I think we were just wrong. I mean, look at this stuff." He waved a hand at the collection of furniture and curios around them. "It's a sure thing that when Don saw Christina here, she hadn't come to check out antiques for his birthday."

"It's not what I expected," admitted Gibbons, glancing about. "Mike said it was an antiques shop, but this looks more like a lot of junk to me."

Bethancourt frowned. "Of course, there's a market for secondhand goods," he said slowly, "but, well, look at this table here, for instance. They haven't even cleaned it up properly, or bothered to put a price tag on it. And over there—there's a layer of dust I can see from here on all that stuff near the wall. What if the shop is just a front for another kind of business and Christina found out about it?"

Gibbons was peering into the



dim recesses of the shop. "You could be right," he said. "Do you think most of these things are English?"

"They're not supposed to be," answered Bethancourt, "but they're such blatant fakes, I couldn't tell you where they were actually made. This table, for instance, is pretending to be French Provincial." He gazed down at it disdainfully.

Gibbons smiled. "Well, well," he said. "A private plane and imported furniture add up to just one kind of business to my mind: smuggling."

"That's what I was thinking," said Bethancourt.

"So you think Christina was in on it with Mike, and there was a falling out among thieves?" asked Gibbons, his smile disappearing. "It's funny, but that's not the picture I had of her."

"Nor I. But it might not have been that. As an antiques expert, she would have been even more likely than me to have tumbled to the fact that this place wasn't earning its keep. But how could she tell her husband that his beloved brother was a criminal? He probably wouldn't have believed her without proof, and even if she'd had it, well, how could she be the one to put Mike behind bars? She had to have been worried that it would sour her marriage for good and all."

Gibbons was smiling again. "I like that hypothesis better," he said, "although the other is just as likely. In any case, we might as well check the smuggling theory out. Let's have a closer look at some of this furniture."

They had ample time in which to carry out their inspection. Sergeant Anderson had understandably set out to capture the fugitive before attending to the problem of his superior. He rang back while they were examining the legs of a stout pine kitchen table to say that he was on his way with reinforcements to the airfield and that he had alerted the local constabulary to Gibbons' situation.

"They're on their way," said Gibbons, pushing the mobile back into his pocket. "I hope they're in time—and I hope we're right about where Michaels was going because otherwise I'm going to end up looking an even bigger ass than I do at present."

"Are they coming to let us out soon?" asked Bethancourt hopefully. He was getting quite hungry.

"Anderson's rung the locals," replied Gibbons. "No doubt they'll be round as soon as they can dig up a pair of bolt cutters. What have you got there?"

Bethancourt was busy prying the round feet off the pine kitchen table, which they had upended. "Look at that one there," he said. "The leg's been hollowed out. Yes, and it's the same with this one."

"Pity there's nothing still in there," said Gibbons, peering down.

"If there was anything left on the premises, Mike probably took it with him," answered Bethancourt. "Sergeant Anderson will find it if he catches him up. Let's have a look at that Italian monstrosity next. It deserves to be pulled apart."

In another hour two police sergeants and a constable came to let





them out, wearing broad grins at the thought of a Scotland Yard detective inspector being locked up in a junk shop by his own suspect. Gibbons took their ribbing with good humour and hurried off to get a search warrant and round up a forensics team.

Bethancourt declined to go with him, since dinner did not seem to be included in Gibbons' plans. He summoned a taxi and stopped to eat in Sloane Square. He was in the middle of some excellent lamb chops when Gibbons rang.

"I've just heard from Anderson," he said. "They got Mike and his friend at the airfield. You'll never guess what they were smuggling."

"Not drugs?" asked Bethancourt, a little surprised.

"Not a bit of it. It was diamonds."

"Ah," said Bethancourt, leaning back. "From the Congo, perhaps? They've got mercenaries of every description there, no doubt British among them."

"I don't know about that," said Gibbons cheerfully, "although it does seem likely. Anyway, I've got forensics going over the shop, and I'm meeting Parkinson at the nick to take our first crack at Mike. Do you want to come and loiter round, or shall I ring you when the interview's done?"

"Ring me," said Bethancourt firmly. "I'll probably be at home, but if you don't get me there, I'll be on the mobile."

"I don't expect," said Parkinson gloomily, "that there's any chance Mike Michaels actually killed her? No doubt as soon as we think we've

got him to rights, another suspect will pop up. Agnes Millbank, perhaps."

Gibbons laughed. "You won't get any guarantees from me. I've never seen such a case."

"What gave you the idea it was Mike and not Donald?" asked Parkinson. "You didn't say anything to me."

"Well, I wasn't sure but what Donald had done it," said Gibbons, ignoring the faintly accusatory tone of his colleague. "I really went round just to clear up a couple of points—I've never been absolutely sure in my own mind whether Christina and Mike were having an affair or not. I was pushing that at him when he took off like a whippet. I'm still not sure what I said that made him run."

Parkinson rubbed his chin, appeased. "Well, let's see what he has to say for himself," he said.

But neither Mike Michaels nor his flatmate had anything to say, and Gibbons was soon reflecting that training men to give nothing but name, rank, and serial number under questioning was not necessarily a good thing.

Bethancourt was in a contemplative mood after his solitary meal and walked home from Sloane Square with Cerberus padding along at his side. He had never known a case to end so abruptly and unexpectedly, and he soon turned off the King's Road into the quieter byways of Chelsea in order to better reflect on the surprising turn of events and the fact that the case seemed to be solved at last.



It was as he turned the corner onto his own block that he saw the Jaguar. With all that had happened he'd all but forgotten about it, and now he stopped and stared, a little taken aback by the car's sudden appearance.

Gibbons had parked it under a streetlamp, and the grey-green curves of its body gleamed softly in the light, a sleek and shining tribute to the blending of art and machine. It was beautiful. It was just what he'd wanted. But he could feel none of the joy that had enraptured him a scant five days ago. He called to his dog and walked on past, mending his pace. But he could not help looking back over his shoulder.

"Well, Mr. Michaels," said Gibbons cheerfully three days later, "everything seems to be coming together nicely. Forensics has done a lovely job on the back room of the shop and found Christina Michaels' blood in the floorboards and traces of her skin on some pieces of twine." He tilted his head to one side. "Would you like to tell me how she cut herself whilst visiting you recently? No? Then we'll assume the blood proves the shop was the scene of the crime. What's more, we found her purse and a bloody blanket in your waste bin, so the injury story wouldn't really have done you much good. I'm a little curious about that, Mr. Michaels. That bin has certainly been emptied since Christina was killed, so you must have tossed the purse and blanket out quite recently. Why didn't you get rid of them on the night?"

Michaels did not reply. Indeed,

Gibbons felt he could have counted on the fingers of one hand the times Michaels had spoken since his arrest.

"You won't even tell me that, eh?" continued Gibbons. "Well, no doubt it will come out at the trial. So, as I say, everything seems to be coming along quite nicely, and really all that's left is to formally charge you and Andy Mason with murder."

At this Michaels stirred and looked at him. "If you think I killed her," he said carefully, "why are you charging Andy?"

"Because we can't really be sure which of you struck the blow," answered Gibbons, still cheerful. "Mr. Mason maintains that he was with you at the pub. We know that neither of you were actually there, so that means you were both probably at the shop."

In fact, Gibbons had discovered that Andy Mason had been at his girlfriend's flat. She'd been having a party that night, and Mason had gone over early to help set up as had two of her friends, giving him a solid alibi. But confronted with this information, Mason had remained loyal to his friend and insisted that he and Michaels had been at the pub together. Loyalty, Gibbons supposed, was another trait encouraged in the military that was only to be deplored in a murder investigation.

It was Bethancourt who had suggested that such loyalty probably ran both ways, and might be used to force the truth out of Michaels. Gibbons eyed his suspect narrowly and thought that Bethancourt could be right. Michaels was frown-

ing and had begun to fidget slightly. After the stolid, unmoving presence he had previously been, Gibbons thought it a good sign.

"So that's that then," he said briskly. "We'll be turning it all over to the prosecutor tomorrow, and no doubt they'll be moving you both shortly. I doubt you'll get bail, considering the plane and all."

It was important, he felt, not to show that he wanted anything more out of Michaels, so he turned to go, albeit rather slowly. He was prepared with a few more remarks to be delivered at the door, but Michaels stopped him before he reached it.

"Andy wasn't there," he said. "He didn't know anything about it."

Gibbons turned, raising an eyebrow.

"Then you were there alone?"

"Yes. But I never meant to kill her."

Gibbons walked back to the table. "How did it happen?" he asked skeptically.

"I only meant to stun her," said Michaels. "I didn't want her clawing and kicking at me, so I thought a tap on the head would disorient her enough that I could get her tied up without a lot of fuss. I didn't realise she was dead at first. I got her tied to the chair, and it was only when she wouldn't come round that I thought to feel for a pulse and found I'd killed her. I still can't believe she went down that easily—I swear I didn't hit her that hard."

Gibbons did not believe this at first, but just as he was about to reply, he remembered the post mortem report and what Donald

had said about how their row had ended.

"That's possible," he said slowly. "She had already hit her head once that evening when Donald pushed her away and she slipped and fell against the bedpost. If you struck her on the same spot..."

Michaels looked startled. "Ah, bummer," he said in disgust. "That would have been it, all right."

"But why did you want to tie her up in the first place?" demanded Gibbons.

Michaels hesitated. Having cleared his friend of the murder charge, it was obvious that he was not inclined to speak further. But then he shrugged. "You may as well know, I suppose. She'd twigged to the smuggling. When Don caught her visiting me, it wasn't to look at birthday presents for him. She'd rung and said there was something she wanted to talk to me about alone." He gave a short laugh. "I was worried about it, was afraid she meant to chat me up. I couldn't have been more wrong. She told me she knew about the smuggling, but that she wouldn't go to the police if I swore to stop it. She didn't want Don to find out, you see, although why that was, I couldn't make out. So of course I promised to get out of the business and get Andy out, too."

"But you didn't," said Gibbons.

Michaels spread his hands. "How could I go to Andy and tell him I'd ruined his living? It was all his set-up, he'd put in all the work long before I got out of the RAF. He only brought me in because we were friends. I suppose I could have told



him I'd had enough, but then what was there to stop Christina from having him arrested? She certainly wouldn't have cared if Don found out Andy was a criminal."

"So you didn't tell Mr. Mason about this at all?"

"No, of course not. I wasn't sure what to do at first. Then I thought a threat might work. I only meant to scare her, that was the point of tying her up, so she'd think I meant business. I rang her and asked her to come to the shop, said I could prove to her Andy and I were going straight. At first she said she didn't know when she could come, but she rang back that afternoon and said Don would be working late and she could come then. It worked out beautifully for me because Andy was going out early that night and wouldn't have to know anything about it."

"I see," said Gibbons. "So you hit her on the head when she arrived and then found she was dead. What happened then?"

"My first thought was to call 999 and pretend it had been an accident," Michaels answered. "But I'd already tied her up, you see, and I knew that would leave marks. So then I got the idea of dumping the body in the street—I thought they might not bother doing an autopsy on an obvious hit-and-run. But Andy had taken his van over to Gail's place and I had to wait until it was dark in any case. So I bundled her in a blanket and cleaned up the blood and then went to the party. I pretended I wasn't feeling well, and in truth, I wasn't. I left around half nine or ten and took

Andy's van back to the shop—I've a spare set of keys. I put Christina in the back and drove until I was well out of the neighborhood and then left her body in the street."

"But what about the blanket and the purse?" asked Gibbons. "Why didn't you just toss them in a trash bin nearby?"

Michaels grimaced. "That was a mistake. I had to hurry, you see, because I had to get the van back and into the same parking space where Andy had left it. I'd pulled some bins into the space before I left, but somebody could have come along and moved them. I just forgot about the blanket in the back, and it wasn't until I got home that I found her purse. I should have looked for it before, but it never occurred to me, and somehow I didn't notice it when I was cleaning up. I reckoned I'd already pushed my luck far enough that night, so I just stashed it in my closet, figuring I could get away later, out to the country someplace, and burn it. I meant to go in the next couple of days, but then Don was so broken up, I ended up staying with him." He looked, for the first time during this tale, truly remorseful. "Don took it hard," he said. "He was worse than I thought."

And, thought Gibbons, finding out his beloved brother murdered his wife isn't likely to make him feel any better. But he said nothing; by his expression, Michaels had already thought of that for himself.

Gibbons recounted all this to Bethancourt that evening at a celebratory dinner at Gavvers.



"So we were right," said Bethancourt. "Christina wasn't in on the smuggling business."

"Not to hear Michaels tell it," said Gibbons, spooning up crème caramel. "And I do think he's telling the truth at long last. Thanks for that tip about loyalty, by the way. That's what made him open up."

Bethancourt waved this away. "At least now I can go back to Paris with a clear conscience," he said. "I have to say, after having Wally and then Don all sewn up, so to speak, I wasn't absolutely sure until tonight that Mike was guilty. I kept wondering if there weren't something we'd overlooked and coming up with fantastic scenarios."

"It's fantastic enough as it is," said Gibbons. "I've never seen two open-and-shut cases dissolve so quickly. So when will you go back?"

"Tomorrow I think. Marla's already on the warpath, and if I delay any longer, there probably won't be much point in my going at all. I'll take the first train in the morning, as soon as I've returned the S-Type to Creamer."

Gibbons looked up, surprised. "You haven't done that yet?"

"Somehow I haven't got round to it." Bethancourt tapped his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. "Marla says she can't see the point. She says that if a body was going to be found in someone's new car, she can't think who would be a more appropriate choice than me. Aside from you, of course."

"She's got a point there," said Gibbons, chuckling.

"I suppose she has, at that. Do you want a cognac or anything?"

"No." Gibbons shook his head. "I'm pretty tired, really. I think I'll reward myself with a taxi home and get to bed. I seem to have worked awfully hard on a case that wasn't even mine."

"All right, then. Just let me get the check."

Bethancourt saw Gibbons into his taxi and then turned for home himself. At the flat he paused only briefly before setting out with Cerberus for the dog's evening walk. It was a clear, perfect night, and instead of heading home after they had visited their usual spot along the embankment, Bethancourt turned back and walked up the block to the streetlamp where the S-Type was parked.

When his master stopped, Cerberus padded forward and sniffed in a desultory way at the tyres, but this time he showed no particular interest in the boot. Bethancourt lit a cigarette and leant up against the lamppost, considering. He had avoided coming past this spot since the first night he had unexpectedly encountered the car here, just as he'd avoided taking it back to the dealer, or even having Creamer come and fetch it himself. It was true that his first delight in a new purchase had been ruined, but it would hardly be recaptured by the arrival of a substitute. And as for unpleasant associations, the new car he had ordered would remind him of Christina's murder just as surely as this one would. He would remember it every time he looked at the new car and wished it were grey-green instead of the blue he had at last decided upon.



"Do you know, Cerberus," he said suddenly, "if we started now, we could be in Paris by morning. Marla would be pleased."

Cerberus looked up and wagged his tail, an automatic response to the sound of his master's voice, but Bethancourt chose to take it as an assent. "Very well then," he said, pushing away from the lamp-post. "I'll ring Creamer from Paris and tell him I've decided to keep the car after all. Come on, lad. Let's go back and collect our things."

Since he had been half ready to leave for the last three days, it did not take long to put a few last minute things together and take from his desk both his own passport and the one the British government had recently given Cerberus, to enable him to reenter the country without a six month quarantine.

In fifteen minutes they were back at the new Jaguar. Bethancourt hesitated as he stood before the boot, but when he opened it, nothing untoward met his eye. He slung in his bag and closed it smartly, moving around to unlock the rear door for Cerberus. This time the big dog leapt in without hesitation and began a thorough olfactory examination of the back seat. Bethancourt closed the door and let himself into the driver's seat. He sat quietly for a moment, his hands lying lightly on the wheel while his eyes took in the maple curves of the dashboard. Then he reached forward and started the engine.

"You haven't had the best start," he said to the car, "but never mind. Let's see what you can do."

He let in the clutch, and the Jaguar leapt away from the curb.



# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the June issue.*

"As you may know," began my old friend Detective Justin Case, "I collect rare stamps as a hobby."

"Must be relaxing," I commented.

"Far from it," he said. "Some collectors are suspicious, conniving, jealous—practically paranoid. But I never expected one of them to commit murder just for some stamps. It happened while I was attending the Rare Stamp Club convention in Reno."

"Tell me more," I urged, suddenly interested.

"Well, in addition to my wife and me (we were on floor five), there were nine couples, including Mr. and Mrs. Unser, each assigned a room on a different floor of the convention hotel—floors two through twelve except for floors five and nine. One man was named Ivan, and two wives were named Donna and Elvira.

"That fateful night the man from Utica came to me quite agitated. Upon returning to his room, he had found his wife murdered and his valuable mint sheet of 1847 ten cent imperforate stamps missing ..."

(1) Oddly, no husband and wife had the same first initial. Nor did any couple's last name have the same initial as their home city.

(2) Mrs. Smith was four floors below Gilda and four floors above the woman from Utica. They were married (in some order) to Abe, Ben, and Carl.

(3) The man from Raleigh (who wasn't Frank) was four floors below Don and four floors above Mr. Tuttle. Their wives included Alice, Beth, and Clara.

(4) The woman from Tampa was four floors below Idella and four floors above Greg's wife. Their last names included O'Hara, Quimby, and Randall.

(5) Hal (who wasn't Mr. Tuttle) was somewhere below Mr. Parker and somewhere above Flora's husband. They came from Miami, Peoria, and Queens (in some order).

(6) Hilda (who wasn't from Norwich) was just below Mrs. Melton and just above Elmo's wife.

(7) Mrs. Quimby (who wasn't from Peoria) was just below the wife from Salem.

(8) The man from Omaha (who wasn't Carl) was on the floor just above Mr. O'Hara.

(9) Alice, who wasn't on the top floor, had a room just above Mrs. North.

(10) Ben's room was higher in the hotel than that of Beth's husband.

"So, based on that information, I began my investigation."

"I presume, Justin," I said, "that the murderer was someone attending the convention?"

"It was. I arrested the man from Miami after my search turned up the stolen stamps in his briefcase. He later confessed."

*Who murdered whom for the sake of the rare stamps?*

See page 52 for the solution to the April puzzle.

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Can you use help working these puzzles?

If so, try "Solving the 'Unsolved,'" a 24-page booklet by Robert Kesling that shows you how most logic puzzles are solved.

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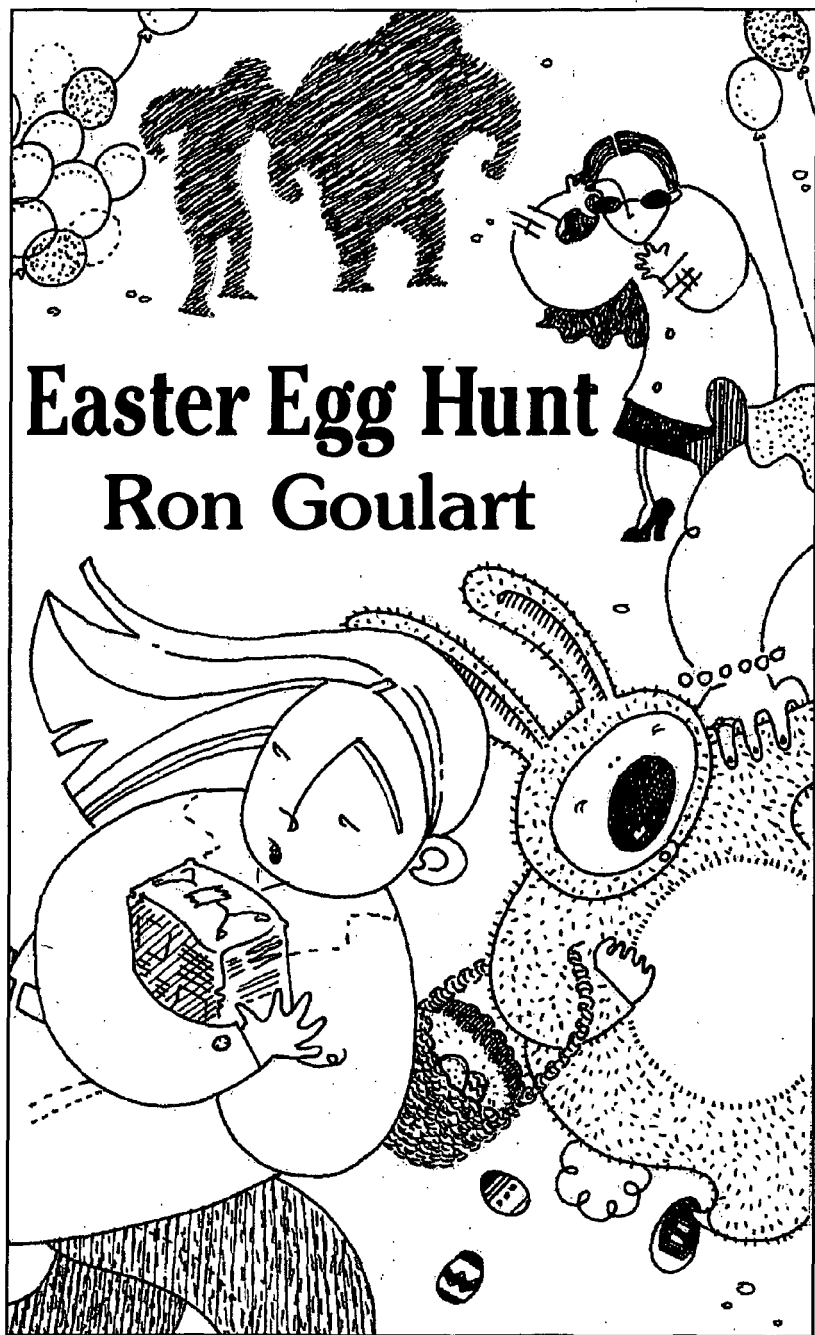


Illustration by Kelly Denato

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/02

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**H**er sister, he later found out, was an even more ambitious and inventive liar than she'd ever been.

He never even knew that Casey McLeod had a sister until that rainy Good Friday afternoon when he got the phone call.

Wes Goodhill had been sitting at his drawing board in his middle-sized office at the Sparey Arts Animation Studios. "It's difficult to design likable boll weevils," he remarked, looking away from what he was sketching and out one of the rain-spattered windows.

Mike Filchuck, his redhaired screenwriter friend, was slouched in the canvas sling chair. He was wearing a Scottish tweed sports coat made in Guatemala. "You're not supposed to like the Weevil Brothers," he said, glancing again at his watch. "They're ugly, obnoxious, offensive, and flatulent. That's the appeal of the kids' books."

"The thinking hereabouts is that they have to be cute when we convert them into a Saturday morning animated cartoon series."

"Kids don't want cute, likable boll weevils. Maybe when you and I were tots cute, likable boll weevils would've been all the rage. But no more," Filchuck asserted. "My son from my second marriage dotes on those Weevil Brothers books. He likes those offensive little buggers better than he likes me."

"Understandable. But I've been instructed to make them cute for our version."

Shrugging, Filchuck pointed out, "It's nigh onto a quarter after one, old pal. The reservation I made at

the Depression Diner is for one thirty. So let us be—"

"Very few people eat there any more; we'll get a booth." Putting his pencil in the trough, Wes stood up. "How's your proposed reality-based television show coming?"

"CBS is interested, as is Fox." Filchuck rose from the chair. "But all and sundry are unhappy with our title."

"I thought *Abandoned in the Desert* was a snappy title." Wes gathered his coat off the eagle-topped hat rack.

"That was modified two weeks ago to *Locked in the Basement*."

"How does that fit a show about a dozen people trying to survive in the Mojave?"

"The desert didn't cost-out right," explained the writer. "So we'll build a basement set here in Studio City as soon as we sell the concept to somebody."

"A basement set isn't my idea of reality."

"Hey, this is Hollywood. Who can say for sure what reality is?" Filchuck headed for the doorway.

Wes's phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Don't get mad or angry and say that I've recessed into my old ways or—"

"Regressed," he corrected.

Casey sighed. "The point being—can you drive with me up the coast to Verdugo Bay? That's just beyond Santa Barbara."

"When exactly?"

"I'm all packed and at our place. In an hour maybe? Since it's Good Friday, you can probably get the afternoon off."

"I suppose, but what's the hurry?"

She sighed again. "See, I haven't mentioned any of this to you before. Not that I was fibbing or anything but just simply editing the news somewhat. What I mean is, they do that at CNN and ABC and nobody—well, hardly anybody—accuses them of being liars or—"

"Casey, why do you want to go to Verdugo Bay?"

"My sister's in real danger."

He took a slow, deep breath, in and out. "What sister?" he inquired. "I only recently learned that you possessed an extant father. Now, Casey, you're telling me you also have a sister."

"She's my half-sister, actually."

"Even so."

"I'll explain everything, in great detail—I promise, Wes—as we drive up there," said Casey. "Right now, though, the important thing is that somebody's trying to kill Kate."

"That's her name?"

"Kate Coventry, yes."

"Why is someone trying to kill her?"

"She thinks it has something to do with the Easter egg."

He took two more slow, deep breaths, in and out. "Okay," he said finally. "I'll be back at our beach cottage in about an hour."

"Alexi Oblamov?" said Wes.

"I appreciate your interest in my sister's plight," said the slim, blonde Casey. "But every time you interrupt, it spoils the even flow of the succinct and lucid narrative I'm trying to unfold, you know."

"Succinct and lucid?" He shook his head. "What's unfolded, thus far

anyway, sounds to me like one of those complex truth-free whoppers you used to try to foist on me in the past before you reformed. Your sister Kate must be an even more gifted liar than you were at your peak."

"Kate never lies, ever. She's the black sheep of the family."

"*She's* the black sheep?" He sat up some in the passenger seat, causing the safety belt to dig into his chest.

"Well, growing up in my family, Wes, if you were upright and completely truthful, you sort of stood out."

They were about an hour out of Los Angeles, heading north in Casey's red Toyota. The rain had diminished to a misty drizzle. Casey, wearing jeans and a fisherman pullover, was driving.

"Okay, continue," said Wes, noticing that a miffed pout was arriving on Casey's face. "I'll strive manfully not to cry out in disbelief or express puzzlement about obscure Russian artisans."

Casey relaxed her grip on the steering wheel slightly. "I didn't mean to chop your head off. It's only that I'm really concerned about Kate and—"

"Bite my head off," he corrected.

"Neither one," she said. "Alexi Oblamov was a late nineteenth century goldsmith, a rival of that fellow Carl Fabergé."

"Fabergé I've heard about. He made fancy jeweled Easter eggs out of gold and silver and precious stones for the Russian czars."

"Apparently, according to my sister, so did Oblamov, although he's

not as well known to the general public," explained Casey, scowling as a car sped past her on the left and then cut in front of her. "Nitwit! Where was I?"

"Eggs."

"So Fabergé supposedly turned out more than fifty of the darn things, though only forty-some have been accounted for. Oblamov is said to have produced only five of his eggs, all for a wealthy Siberian goldmine owner named Theodore Goncheroff. He produced the eggs from 1897 to 1902."

"Did you know about this stuff before Kate phoned you?"

"No, but I'm good at memorizing," she reminded him. "When I was doing TV commercials, I was known as a quick study. Plus I looked a little of this up on the Net while I was waiting for you."

"What happened to Oblamov?"

"He disappeared in the summer of 1902 while on a visit to Paris," Casey said. "The last time they auctioned an Oblamov egg—that was at Christie's in Manhattan in 1995—it went for a shade over two million dollars."

"And your sister has an idea where one of the five Oblamov eggs can be obtained?"

"Kate knows where a *sixth* one is," said Casey.

They arrived in the town of Verdugo Bay as the day was starting to fade. The water of the narrow bay was turning paler, the sun was dropping closer to the horizon. The misty rain continued.

Their car climbed up from the coast highway and entered the

town. There were several adobe buildings surrounding the small town square. On the slanting red tile roofs doves were already settling down.

A large banner had been hooked to the bandstand in the center of the grassy common.

"'Annual Easter Egg Hunt,' " read Wes as they drove by. "Here tomorrow afternoon. Looks like we're not the only ones hunting for an Easter egg."

"Let's hope they're referring to the hardboiled kind." Casey was studying the street signs they were passing. "We don't want any competition."

"But from what your sister told you, there is some competition."

"Kate's afraid there is, yes. That's why she got in touch with me."

"When's the last time you heard from her?"

"Ah, there's Verdadero Road." She made a right turn onto a narrow, twilight lane. "Oh, I guess I haven't seen hide nor tail of her for—it must be five years at least."

"Hide nor hair," he corrected. "Do you have any other relatives I don't know about? Eventually they're going to be my in-laws and I'd like some advance warning so I—"

"That's very sweet."

"What? That I'm curious about how many other con men and prevaricators I can expect?"

"It's sweet, I mean, that you're implying we'll be married someday."

"Won't we?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Casey, driving slower. "But I have the feeling that you still don't trust me



completely. Once a liar, always a liar is what most people think. And because of my past record of stretching the truth now and then, why—”

“Stretching isn’t the applicable word, Case. Rending it asunder, ripping it to pieces, building huge edifices of malarkey atop it.”

“That’s, trust me, all in the past, Wes.”

“So I’d like to believe.”

“You know darn well I haven’t told any major fibs for—oops, there’s 1343 Verdadero.”

“No lights on,” he mentioned.

Casey parked the Toyota near the corner under a stand of pepper trees. She shut off the motor, glanced back at the small white stucco cottage marked 1343. “Kate’s lying low, remember? Let’s go.”

“Do these people she says want to kill her know where she’s hiding out?”

“No, she shook them off.” Casey eased out of the driver’s seat.

He joined her on the dusky sidewalk. “And what exactly does she want you to do?”

“I’m supposed to find the Obla-move egg and bring it to her,” she answered.

Kate Coventry hugged her sister as soon as she’d closed and locked the front door. “You’re as cute as ever, Casey,” she said, smiling, then stepping back. She was an inch or so taller, three or four years older. Unlike Casey, she had dark hair. She wore rimless glasses and very little makeup. Her suit was grey, sedate, businesslike.

“You look thinner, Kate.”

“Probably from all the stress I’ve been under the past couple of weeks.” She smiled a shy smile at Wes. “I didn’t know anything about you until I talked to Casey on the phone this morning. She tells me you’re very important to her.”

“She sometimes tells me that, too.”

Moving to the windows, Kate made certain the drapes were tightly closed. Even after she clicked on a single floor lamp, the small living room remained shadowy around the edges. “I’m sorry I made you wait on the porch for a couple of minutes,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the low sofa. “I wished to make certain it was you and that nobody followed you here.”

Casey and Wes settled in armchairs that faced her sister. “Nobody followed us, sis.”

Wes rested his palms on his knees. “Whose house is this?”

“I rented it for a month,” Kate answered. “It’s a sublet, Mr. Goodhill.”

“He’s probably going to be your brother-in-law,” Casey told her. “You might as well call him Wes.”

Kate gave him another shy smile, pushing at her glasses with a forefinger. “I don’t know how much Casey’s told you, Wes, but—”

“I told him pretty much everything you told me, along with some historical background I researched. Which still doesn’t give him a crystal clear picture of what the heck is going on.”

Kate asked, “Would either of you like a cup of coffee or maybe some herb tea? I haven’t laid in too many supplies, but I can certainly—”

"Just tell us something about Oblamov's egg," suggested her sister. "All I really know is that it exists, somebody else wants it, and you're in serious danger."

Sighing, Kate folded her hands in her lap. "The last time we got together I was here on the coast on an assignment for the ad agency I was working for in New York," she began. "About four years ago I said goodbye to all that and decided to put my Ph.D. to better use. So I—"

"I didn't know you had a Ph.D.," said Casey.

"That happened about eight years ago. During another of the long spells when we didn't see much of each other."

"Didn't see anything of each other."

"I know, honey, and I'm sorry about that," her sister said. "At any rate, I've been teaching history and English at Flennican College for the past three years. It's a small private college near Seattle. One of my specialties is late nineteenth century and early twentieth century American writers. It seems my college has the papers of a now-forgotten radical American novelist named Edwin Redfield. Like the better known Ambrose Bierce, Redfield disappeared in Mexico. In his case it was in 1916. Among his papers were journals he kept for most of the years before he vanished, and until I came along, nobody had ever done a very thorough reading of them. It seems he was in Russia in 1910 and had an affair with a Russian countess. As a memento—she was extremely wealthy—the lady gave Redfield an Oblamov egg."

"But not one of the five?" asked Wes.

Kate leaned forward. "The countess had lived in Paris some years earlier and had been quite close to Oblamov. Extremely taken with her, he created a special egg for her." She paused for a second. "I'd estimate, from the descriptions of it in the journals, that its current value is in the neighborhood of three million dollars."

Casey made an appreciative noise. "What happened to Oblamov? He disappeared from Paris in 1902."

"Redfield suspected that one of the countess's jealous suitors had had Oblamov killed and tossed in the Seine. A great loss to the world of art."

Wes asked, "How did the sixth egg get to Verdugo Bay? I assume it is here and that's why you're in town."

"Oh yes, the sixth Oblamov is here," she answered. "And thanks to the Redfield papers, I know exactly where he hid it nearly ninety years ago."

"But you can't go and get it?"

She gave a sad shake of her head. "Unfortunately someone knows I'm aware of its hiding place," she said. "Should he and his associates spot me, I'm very much afraid they'll kill me and steal the egg."

A hard wind came up, and the rain turned heavy again. The shutters on their suite in the Rancho Marina Hotel rattled and creaked, and gusts of rain slapped at the windows.

Casey was heating a cup of cocoa

in the microwave in the tiny kitchen unit. "Do you believe in the old adage 'It takes one to know one?'" she asked Wes.

He was stretched out atop the bed, fully dressed, arms locked behind his head. "Are you implying that you don't completely believe Kate's story?"

"My father, as you know, isn't a man with a deep-rooted respect for the truth," she said. "But darn it, I always thought Kate was above all that, that she was the only truthful one in the whole family. I guess, though, that DNA will out."

"Which part of her narrative do you doubt? Don't you think the Oblamov egg is hidden in the ground over Edith Tipton's grave in the old rundown Wildwood Cemetery here in town? That Edwin Redfield stashed it there at the site of his local sweetheart's last resting place just before he went on to Mexico to fight in the revolution?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure there's a hidden egg and that it's exactly where Kate says it'll be." When the microwave pinged, Casey popped the door open and fetched out her cup of cocoa. "The thing I have doubts about is how it got there."

"You promised your sister we'd sneak into that abandoned cemetery sometime after midnight tonight and find the egg," he reminded her. "We're to turn it over to her early tomorrow morning at her rented house. Her school maintains that Redfield left all his worldly goods to Flennican College and therefore the sixth Oblamov egg is legally theirs. To avoid possible legal hassles with the town fathers,

they believe it's wiser to disinter the egg and carry it away to Seattle. Do you also find that part of the yarn difficult to accept?"

"That too, yeah." Casey took a sip from her cup. "On the other hand, the part about her ex-boyfriend turning out to be a crook interested in stealing the egg from her is probably true. In fact, he and his cronies are probably the ones who are trying to find her and bump her off. His cronies at least."

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, watching Casey. "Meaning what?"

Casey tilted her head slightly to the right, narrowing one eye. "Well, while you were out buying stuff for our little fridge, I did some more research," she confessed. "I used my laptop, plus a few information gathering tricks I learned from a fellow I got to know the last time I was in Brazil."

"Which fellow is this?"

"We were just chums, don't get upset," she said. "The important thing is what I found out."

He was silent for about five seconds. "Okay, what'd you find out?"

Pouring her unfinished cocoa in the small sink, she answered, "It's pretty darn disappointing." She gave a sad shake of her head. "First off, my sister is not a teacher at Flennican College."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely," said Casey. "Chiefly because there's no such place in or near Seattle or anywhere else."

"Yep, she's carrying on the grand family tradition."

"And I don't think there's a sixth Oblamov egg at all."

"So this is must be a stolen one."

"Using my computer skills, I found out that an Oblamov egg, valued at one point seven mil, was swiped from a private owner in Chicago three years ago. It hasn't surfaced since."

"And that could well be the one Kate is seeking."

"The name of the guy she says is trying to hijack the egg and have her knocked off is Larry Bonnestel, remember?" said Casey. "Well, there really is a Larry Bonnestel, except he's now serving time in a prison in Oregon. He's been there almost three years."

"For burglary?"

"Yes, although he's also been a suspect in some con games worked on the East Coast and in the Midwest," she said. "So, I hate to admit, has my sister Kate."

"She's been in jail, too?"

"Not thus far, no. But I'm a little worried."

"What next, Case?"

She smiled, rubbed her palms together twice. "We'll dig up the egg."

"And then?"

Her smile widened. "I've got a couple of ideas about that."

By midnight the rain had ceased, but the wind persisted. The trees in the stretch of woodland above the old Wildwood Cemetery swayed and rattled, shaking old rain down on them. The ground was mushy and wet. "I can see why graverobbing has never much caught on," observed Wes as they worked their way down to the graveyard from where they'd hidden the car.

"We're not, technically, robbing

any graves." Casey turned up the collar of her windbreaker. "What we're doing is retrieving a missing artifact."

"Let's hope that if the local cops descend on us they'll understand the distinction."

Part of the stone wall that surrounded the slanting acre of burying ground had long since crumbled away. They made their way into the abandoned cemetery through the gap.

"Edith Tipton's grave is supposed to be next to that lone weeping willow." Casey started to wend her way through the gravestones and marble angels.

A strong gust of wind came racing through the dark cemetery, shaking moisture out of the weeping willow and spattering Casey and Wes. "I could've been snug at home drawing boll weevils," he mentioned, shaking himself.

"I think this is the gravesite." Casey was crouching in front of a rounded stone surmounted by the winged head of a cherub. After glancing carefully around, she extracted a small flashlight from the pocket of her coat. Shielding it with one hand, she clicked on the narrow beam. "Yep. 'Edith Tipton, 1860-1914. Poet . . . The Sweet Singer of the Sierras. Rest in Peace.' I wonder what sort of poet she was."

"Obscure," he said, squatting next to Casey.

"Hold the flash while I use the tape measure." She handed it to him. "And don't jiggle."

"It's the wind," he said. "Plus the locale. They combine to produce shivers."

"Now, let's see. Kate said one foot from the exact center of the headstone and then a foot and a half from the edge of the plot. . . . That should be right here where I'm pointing. Got the tools?"

From his raincoat pocket he produced a trowel. "Good thing you carry gardening equipment in your trunk."

"Start digging," she advised.

When they got back to their hotel room, the message light on the bedside phone was blinking.

"I hope this isn't trouble." Casey dropped her knapsack on the rug, picked up the receiver, and activated the voicemail.

"You have one message," droned a mechanical male voice.

Then Kate's voice said, "Slight change of plans, Casey. I got the feeling I wasn't safe where I was, so I've relocated. Don't bring the egg—I'm assuming you got it—to the house. Instead, I'll meet you in the town square at noon tomorrow. Wrap the thing carefully, and hand it over there. I'll be near the bandstand. With a crowd and policemen around, they're not likely to try anything. See you then."

Wes sat on the edge of the bed. "Something wrong?"

Smiling, Casey replied, "No, everything's just fine."

They weren't expecting the parade. Or the fact that they'd have to park the Toyota in an auxiliary lot three blocks from the square.

The day was clear and warm, and at least two hundred of the citizens of Verdugo Bay were turning

out for the Easter egg hunt and its related festivities. The streets were crowded with grownups and children heading for the common or watching the marching bands.

A seven-year-old boy, seriously overweight and dressed as a rabbit, decided to stop directly in front of Casey. She dodged him, nearly dropping the small newspaper-wrapped package she was holding close to her chest. "Oops, excuse me," she said.

"William, you're in the lady's way," said the boy's plump mother. "Say you're sorry."

William gestured toward the passing musicians. "Why won't you buy *me* a trumpet?"

"Let's not go into that again, young man."

Wes took hold of Casey's arm, guiding her around the squabble.

They had to halt at the corner, where one of the many visible tan-uniformed town cops was directing traffic.

"I wanted to play the trombone when I was a kid." Casey was holding the paper-wrapped package with both hands now. "But it wasn't considered ladylike."

"I never envisioned you as leading a ladylike childhood." They crossed the street.

"I did, though, until I was about eleven." As they got closer to the square, Casey started looking around. "I don't spot any suspicious characters. But I suppose if you were a suspicious character, you'd strive not to look like one."

"You might even dress up in a rabbit suit." Yet another band, decked out in blue and gold uni-

forms, was playing a medley of venerable show tunes up on the park bandstand. "There's your sister over by the eucalyptus tree, wearing the dark glasses."

It was indeed Kate Coventry, glancing around uneasily, just to the left of the white-painted stand. The nearest uniformed policeman was a good ten yards from her.

Easing around a flock of restless seven- and eight-year-olds who were waiting for the Easter egg hunt to commence, Casey made her way to her sister. "You okay, Kate?"

Her sister briefly smiled. "I sure hope so," she answered. "I'm pretty sure I shook them off. Is that the egg?"

"It is, yeah," said Wes, who had worked his way through the milling crowd to join Casey. "It was exactly where old Redfield said it was in his journal. Buried in a small, sturdy, galvanized metal box."

"It's really beautiful," added Casey, holding out the wrapped box to Kate. "I just know your fellow historians at Flennican College will savor it and that this sixth Oblamov egg will make a terrific addition to the college art museum. Or if they decide to auction it off at Sotheby's or someplace like that, it will provide the college much needed financial support for many a year to come."

Kate took the package from her sister's hands. "I really appreciate this, honey," she said. "Now I think I'd better lose myself in the crowd and head back to my car. It's a long haul to Seattle, so I'd better get going." She kissed Casey on the cheek. "I'll phone you soon as I get

home, and this time, really, we'll keep in better touch." She tapped Wes on the arm. "And be sure you invite me to your wedding."

She'd gone two steps when two large men pushed their way up to her. "Katie, you didn't think you'd get away with this?" said the larger of the pair. "Larry wants us to share in this, remember?"

"What a coincidence, meeting two of my colleagues from the college in this out-of-the-way town!" Tucking the package under her arm, Kate reached into her purse.

The other man grabbed it away, thrust his hand into it, and jerked out a snub-nosed .32 revolver. At the same time his partner snatched the package from her.

"What in heaven's name are you fellows—"

"Drop the act, Katie." The bigger man ripped the newspaper off the package, revealing a small, galvanized metal box. "Looks like we've got it. See you around, Katie. Don't try to cross Larry again." He spun on his heel and hurried away through the crowd. His partner, Kate's gun in his hand, went running in his wake.

The man with the box turned his head and glanced back for a second. That was why he didn't see little William in his rabbit costume throw himself down on the cropped grass, continuing to protest the denial of a trumpet by his mother. The man tripped over him and lost hold of the box. The lid sprang open, and a golden egg came flying out. It went sailing through the air on a path of its own, flashing brightly in the midday sun.



Then it hit the ground. Its shell cracked, and yolk and white came splashing and spilling out on the grass. "I suppose," said Casey, "I should've hardboiled the thing before I painted it."

Filchock glanced at the sheet of tracing paper tacked to the drawing board on his way to the canvas sling chair. "Those are some mighty cute weevils."

"The mark of a truly gifted animator," said Wes, "lies in his ability to create truly cute boll weevils."

"The newspaper accounts that filtered down from Verdugo Bay left out some essential details," said the redheaded writer. "Such as what happened to Casey's sister."

"Lost in the crowd during the ensuing confusion." Wes turned in his chair to face his friend.

"She's where now?"

"Parts unknown."

"From the brief account you gave me on the phone yesterday, she's an even more ambitious and inventive liar than the fair Casey."

"Casey's retired from the field," he said. "Well, except for the whoppers she told her sister. About the Oblamov egg being in the box she was handing her and all."

"And Casey turned the real egg over to the cops?"

"No, to a representative of the Chicago tycoon it'd been swiped from by Kate's old beau."

"But there were local cops at that Easter egg hunt, and they ended up arresting former partners."

"They were there for crowd control," said Wes. "Although Casey did phone the police anonymously and mentioned that a couple of dangerous crooks were planning a daring daylight robbery on the village green about midday."

"The guy who swiped the box only got the ordinary everyday Easter egg that Casey'd substituted. Is egg snatching a crime?"

"Both of them were carrying guns. It turns out, also, that there were a few warrants out for them. They're in the local lockup."

Filchock said, "So this Bonnestel, from prison, got in touch with Kate. He still trusted her and told her to retrieve the Oblamov egg?"

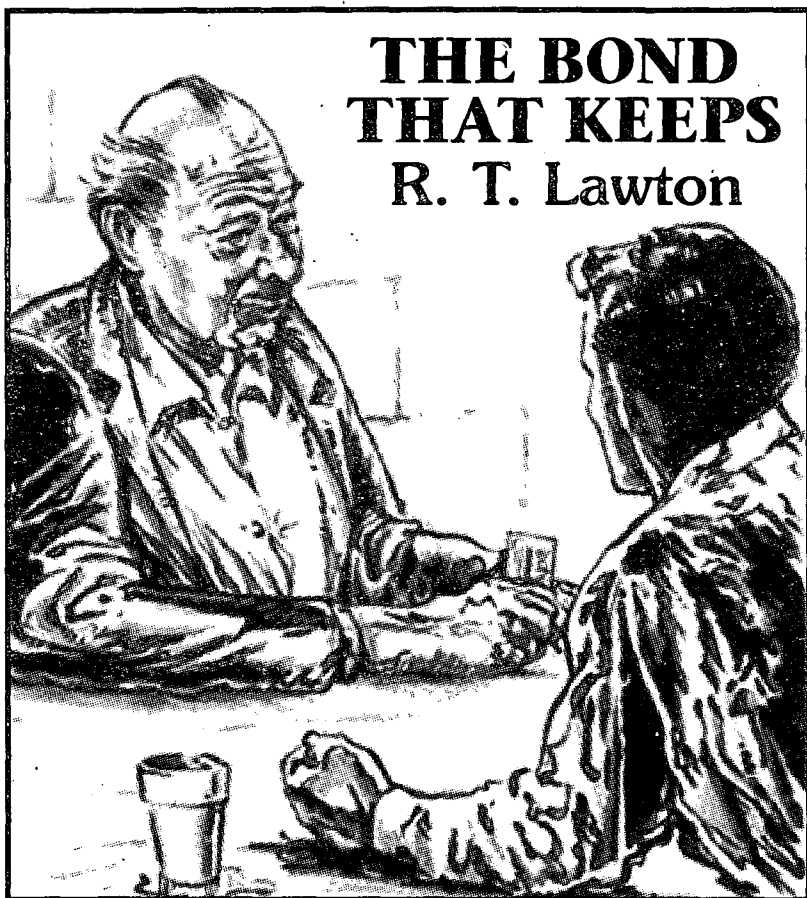
"Yep, but his two erstwhile cronies got wind of that and followed her. So Kate decided to bring in Casey to do the actual retrieval work, since these guys had no idea what she looked like."

"But Casey, suspecting that her supposedly upright and prim sister was up to no good, decided to pull a switch on her and then behaved in an honest manner." Filchock gave a somewhat unbelieving shake of his head. "Can it be that the Belle Starr of the twenty-first century has truly reformed?"

"She has, Mike," Wes assured him. "In fact, we've decided to make our relationship permanent and get married."

Filchock frowned. "You sure you want to do something that drastic?" he asked.

"I do," answered Wes.



## THE BOND THAT KEEPS

R. T. Lawton

**W**ith pale, stubby, almost webbed fingers, Theodore slid his business card across the grey metal table in the interview room of the San Mateo County Jail. The card read:

TWIN BROTHERS BAIL BONDS  
CLETIS JOHNSTON, PROPRIETOR  
"WHEN NO ONE ELSE WILL GO YOUR  
BOND,  
WE'LL DO YOU."  
BAIL AGENT:  
THEODORE OSCAR ALAN DEWEY

Jack Niedekker flipped the card over, then turned it back to the front side.

"There's no address nor phone number on this card."

"We ain't in the yellow pages either," Theodore added.

"Never heard of you guys."

Theodore mopped his balding head and bumpy face with a large white handkerchief. New, persistent beads of moisture popped out just above the well-manicured, pencil thin mustache on his upper lip,



gathered at his chin and dripped down onto an oversized gold chain resting on his hairy, open-shirt chest. Having to wear a sport coat in the jail when the air conditioning had crashed didn't seem to help matters.

"That's cuz we only handle special clients."

"What makes me so special?"

As Theodore's hand paused in midair, the white-on-white silk handkerchief dangled from his clutching fist while the little finger on his left hand pointed straight out as if it had once been broken and then improperly set. A glint of light sparkled on the errant finger from the lump of a two-carat yellow diamond set in a gold pinky ring.

"First off, Jack . . ."

"Hey, bud, we don't know each other that well. Maybe you best call me Mr. Niedekker."

"Of course, *Mr. Niedekker*. In any case, you've been charged with the armed robbery of Feingold's Jewelry Store. Whereas the police don't like to mention the amount taken—it allegedly encourages others to commit similar crimes on jewelry stores—insiders have calculated the retail value at well over a million dollars. That alone puts you in a class of your own, wouldn't you say?"

"Hey, the cops didn't catch me with any jewelry, and I'm not admitting to nothing."

Theodore's two bulbous eyes stared directly into the face of their future client.

"We are not your father confessor, we are merely your bonding company. All that the two of us need to

do is come together on a mutually satisfying arrangement. I have two sets of papers here for you to sign."

"Not so fast, Slick. You gave a first reason. What's the second reason for you to bond me out?"

Theodore's heavy-lidded eyes blinked.

"Mr. Niedekker, I remind you of our company's motto: 'When no one else will go your bond, we'll do you.' And believe me, with your prior record, no other bondsman will put up the large amount necessary for your bail. Seems you've been a very bad boy. You skipped bond on your last two arrests. Not really conducive to trust, is it?"

"How do you know I won't run on you guys?"

"That's where our agreement comes in."

Theodore placed the paperwork on the table so Niedekker could read both sets.

"The contract on your right is the official paperwork that will be filed with the court. It specifies a certain amount of money that you pay us to go your bond. Of course, in reality you do not pay us that amount of money. We do this simply as a sham to satisfy the court that all is on the up and up."

"I'm not sure I understand the sham part, but I don't have this kind of money on hand anyway."

"That's where the second contract, our gentlemen's agreement under the table so to speak, comes in. Here you agree to provide a named item in your possession as security to our company, plus . . ."

"What item is that?"

Theodore referred to a small



black notebook, flipping the pages until he found the desired reference.

"Through various channels that we won't go into, it has come to the attention of our company's proprietor that you have two specific paintings. Place them in our keeping, and they will serve as warrant for your future appearance in court."

"Hey, I got lots of paintings hanging on my apartment walls, but none of them are worth more than a couple of thousand dollars each. Which ones do you want?"

Theodore again referred to the black notebook.

"Not the ones on open display, *Mr. Niedekker*. We want the two you have hanging in the concealed room, the double-locked vault where you keep the fruits of your nighttime endeavors. I believe they are named *Hijo de la Revolución* and *La Angustia de Guerra*. Their combined value runs right at half a million dollars."

"How would you possibly know about those?"

"According to our sources, you committed a theft for order from a Beverly Hills fine arts gallery on Rodeo Drive, leaving much more valuable paintings behind. The local newspapers called it a meticulously planned and well-executed theft. Rather a nice move for your underworld reputation, I take it."

The room grew in silence. Loud ticking came from the clock above the door. Water knocked and gurgled in the pipes inside the walls. Somewhere down the hall, a tele-

phone rang. Finally Theodore cleared his throat.

"*Mr. Niedekker*, I realize that this revelation of your secrets, supposedly known only to you, comes as somewhat of a shock, but I need remind you that time is of the essence here."

Theodore began ticking off selling points on the tips of his fat little fingers, starting with the thumb.

"One, you were paid twenty-five percent upfront to steal the paintings. Two, you stole the paintings. Three, you have not yet delivered the paintings to your client and won't until next month as agreed upon by both parties. Four, if our company holds the paintings temporarily as collateral, it will guarantee your court appearance because we both know your client is the head of a large criminal organization that, as a matter of honor, would have to make a messy example of you if you failed to deliver said paintings as required."

Now Theodore came to the tip of his errant little finger with the diamond pinky ring.

"Last, and very important to you, if you don't get bonded out, you run the risk of someone else's accidentally finding where you stashed the jewels from the Feingold robbery."

With a certain wariness showing in his eyes, Niedekker folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head to one side.

"I know you won't tell me where you got your other information from, but who said *I* had the jewels?"

Theodore came as close as he ever did to smiling these days.



"Your partner in crime, Mr. Harvey Lightfoot, is also about to become one of our clients. Harvey—he allows me to call him by his first name—is a man of fire and ice, two rather interesting contrasts. I would say a very volatile man for his line of work. He has the ability to invoke the emotions of both paranoia and hot passion to work himself up to violent acts and is able to use the coldness of his mind to see the action through no matter what. Which explains his priors for homicide, which somehow always seem to get bargained down to manslaughter."

"Harvey ratted me out?"

"No, no, but he did pass our polygraph exam about not leaving the store with the jewels in *his* possession. And since there were only two of you, that means you carried off the jewels."

"What difference does that make?"

"According to the terms of our unofficial contract, you give the paintings into our custody, plus ten percent of the jewels. Consider it a tithe. I will accompany you after your release from this institution to ensure that our company gets their fair share of the merchandise. So if you'll just sign here and here—" Theodore handed over a 14K gold ballpoint pen "—we can get the ball rolling."

Pen in hand, Niedekker paused as if contemplating his options.

"Let's say I make arrangements for my girlfriend to turn over the paintings to your custody."

"Okay."

"It's only temporary, right? I get

the paintings back after my court appearance?"

"Of course, or you may choose to repay the twenty-five percent upfront commission to your patron of the stolen arts—assuming that he will accept those conditions—and go about your merry way to parts unknown."

"I see. But regardless of those circumstances, you go with me to recover the jewels so you can get your blood-out-of-the-turnip money."

"Our company doesn't like to use such terms as blood money, but essentially you are correct."

Niedekker poised with the pen over the official contract for a couple more minutes, then appeared to make up his mind. He signed at the bottom and pushed the papers across the table. He hesitated again over the signature line of the unofficial document.

Theodore turned his wrist to consult his gaudy Rolex watch, spelled with two L's, and tapped the face of the dial to signify to Niedekker that time was short.

With apparent reluctance, Niedekker signed.

Both contracts safely tucked away, Theodore continued.

"Well, *Jack*, now that we know each other better, you can show me on a map the route you took from the jewelry store so my boss, who has excellent high-level contacts within the police department, can ensure that the law will not stumble over us during the recovery process."

"Wait a minute. How do I know your guys won't gang up on me when I point out the jewels?"



"Your partner Harvey will come with you and me, and he will be armed with a handgun to his satisfaction. Fair enough, *Jack*?"

Niedekker thought about it, then nodded. Using his forefinger, he traced his escape route on the map. Finished, he leaned back, relaxing now that the deal had been struck. Idly he studied the business card again.

In the background came the sound of a key turning in the lock. The door opened, and a uniformed guard filled the door frame.

"Time's up, gentlemen."

Niedekker rose from the grey metal stool bolted to the floor, then stopped.

"There is one more thing I'm slightly curious about here. Your company is Twin Brothers Bail Bonds, but the card only lists one person as the proprietor. What's the story on that?"

Theodore carefully scratched his double chin.

"Cletis and Daryl Johnston were twins. Daryl was born first, so they nicknamed him 'Twin'; Cletis was second and therefore nicknamed 'Twin Brother.' Them two were so alike that close relatives had trouble telling them apart. Very competitive boys even against each other, especially Cletis, since he was second, but then they also did everything together, including starting up the bail bond company."

"So why only one name on the card?"

Theodore mopped his brow again. "The brothers supposedly had a falling out over how business should be conducted. According to

Cletis, Daryl was so mad over the argument that he left town in the middle of the night to start his own bail bond company in another state. After that, Cletis just never bothered to change the company's name."

"Oh, so no big thing then?"

Theodore rubbed his left hand over his bald crown, his pinky finger standing straight up.

"No, no, I'm sure not. Allegedly, Daryl was just too angry to bother taking his clothes with him and no one's heard from him since, but these are subjects I've been told not to discuss in the office and I suggest you don't bring them up in front of Mr. Johnston if you get to meet him. You'll find he can be a very persuasive man about having his own way."

A thin trickle of salty drops made their way down Theodore's back as the guard took Jack Niedekker from the room.

Dressed in a tan Shantung silk suit with a shirt in a subtle shade of burnt orange and a black silk tie, Cletis Johnston stood up from behind his mahogany desk as Theodore knocked before entering the proprietor's private rooms. A green-shaded lawyer's lamp on the desk and strategically placed baby spotlights in the ceiling provided the only light in the richly decorated office.

"I see you have the paintings. He agreed to all our terms?"

Theodore unwrapped a sixteen by fourteen inch canvas and laid it on the desk, then produced a second, similar canvas.





"These don't look like much to me, Mr. Johnston. Just shows a couple of kids, a boy and a girl. Both of them got that thousand yard stare in their eyes."

Cletis opened his desk drawer and removed a pair of white cotton gloves which he drew over the midnight skin of each hand. Upon first meeting Cletis, people remarked that his skin had the look of wet asphalt shining in the headlights of a dark night. They didn't mind his shaved bald head and long, drooping, silky black mustache. These provided a nice look for an eccentric young businessman in this day and age. But what did make people immediately uneasy about Cletis were the unexpected Oriental features of his long, narrow face and his cold black eyes with no surrounding white.

Cletis picked up the matched paintings.

"Theodore, you're a fraud. For all the airs of sophistication that you try to put on, you will never learn the appreciation of fine art. Here I hold a set of exquisite Pablo Rivera paintings, of which the translation reads *Son of the Revolution* and *The Anguish of War*; yet all you see are a couple of kids with unfocused eyes. I for one can understand the desire of the clandestine collector to place these treasures away from the public. Away where only an avid collector can gaze on them with the secret pride of ownership."

"Sure. Whatever."

Theodore extracted the signed contracts from his briefcase and handed them over. "I also picked up copies of the police reports like

you told me to, and I have a map of Niedekker's escape route. Which do you want first?"

Cletis carefully placed the two paintings on the credenza behind his desk. The gloves came off.

"Start with the map."

Theodore spread the city map on the desk and pointed out the escape route. "Feingold's is on the corner here. Jack and Harvey came out the front door. Harvey went right and continued until out of sight while Jack ran left down the block and around the corner. He crossed the street in the middle of that block and went down the alley for two more blocks. Then left on this street for a block and a half. That's where the cops nabbed him."

Cletis studied the map.

"Roughly five blocks to be covered. What do the police reports say? Start at the beginning and see if you can just give me the highlights."

Theodore shuffled through the paperwork until he found the one he wanted.

"The sergeant who responded to the alarm interviewed the store manager, who claimed there were two holdup men wearing red bandannas over the lower part of their faces. The two split up when they went out the front door. The manager further related that he ran after the robber who turned to the left but lost him at the first corner. Allegedly he did not see the robber throw anything away or toss any packages of any kind."

Cletis ran his thumb and forefinger down one side of his mustache.



"That eliminates the first block. Now we're down to four. Read me the arresting officer's report."

"The corporal who snagged Mr. Niedekker said he saw Jack coming at a run for about a block. Since the running man matched the description of one of the robbers, the corporal promptly drove his squad car over the curb and effectively blocked the sidewalk. He then put Jack against the wall and searched him. Allegedly there were no jewels, weapons or bandanna on the suspect's person. The good corporal goes on to describe Jack's clothing as a black baseball cap, L.L. Bean shirt, khaki slacks, white socks, a pair of broken-down brown shoes with wornout leather soles, and no identification or valuables in his pockets. He also did not observe Jack discard anything during his flight."

"Good. We've eliminated another block. Down to three; two in the alley and a half block on either side. Are you certain that Mr. Lightfoot did not take the jewels away from the store?"

"I got to tell you, Mr. Johnston, Harvey passed the polygraph without any doubt, plus he's willing to work with us, and he had no jewels on him at time of arrest. I for one believe him."

Cletis stared at Theodore for several heartbeats. Finally Theodore ducked his head and shuffled the reports, waiting for the next round of questions.

"Since our Mr. Niedekker wisely divested himself of all incriminating evidence, I'm sure the police conducted a thorough search of the

area. Read me the follow-up reports. What did they find?"

Theodore cleared his wet throat.

"We have four reports from searchers who covered Jack's route and one from the jail log. The first patrolman searched the block from the store to the corner, just in case the store manager missed something. He also did the block around the corner. He looked in and under parked cars, in doorways, and on the roof of each business. Nothing."

"Continue."

"Two patrolmen covered the next two blocks including the alleyways, trashcans, roof, and rear doors. They found a 9mm automatic on the rear of a roof in the first block of the alley. It's currently being checked for fingerprints. In the near vicinity, they attempted to wake up and interview a barefoot wino sleeping in a cardboard box. The wino was barely coherent but claimed to have seen and heard nothing. However, he objected so strongly to having his cardboard domicile searched that they called the paddy wagon to haul him away."

"Skip the humor. What else did they find?"

"A rear store window was busted, so they called the owner to come down. Nothing of interest inside. In the next block of the alley they found several dumpsters that had not yet been emptied by the city sanitation department; therefore they spent several hours dumpster diving. While there were many objects of interest found, none of them appear related to our project."

"Keep going."



"Nothing was found on the roof of this block and no broken windows or unlocked doors. The one patrolman does report three pairs of kids' tennis shoes with the laces tied together that were thrown over the high wires in the alley. The shoes just hang there. The type of stuff bigger teenage kids do to weaker ones on the way home from high school."

"You would know about school bullies, wouldn't you, Theodore?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Never mind. What about the next report?"

"The fourth patrolman searched the block and a half down to where the corporal had arrested Jack. He found nothing of interest except for an empty parking space with two hours still left on the meter; therefore he theorized that Jack had an accomplice waiting nearby to spirit away the stolen jewels."

"I see, and what does the jail log tell us?"

"According to the log, Jack received no visitors or phone calls and placed no outgoing calls until shortly after I talked to him, whereupon he asked permission to use the phone. That call went to his girlfriend's apartment, which I speculate was Jack telling her it was okay to give me the paintings from the vault. Harvey also had neither visitors nor phone call activity. Now what?"

Cletis stroked the other side of his silky mustache and contemplated the dark recesses far up in the ceiling of the executive office. After five minutes of absolute si-

lence, Theodore afraid to make even the slightest noise, Cletis spoke.

"You do nothing for two hours. Then you bond out our Mr. Lightfoot. Be sure that he has a weapon of his choice, one that he feels comfortable with. You and Mr. Lightfoot will then proceed to bond out our Mr. Niedekker, whereupon the three of you go off to recover the jewels. Our usual basic type plan. You know what to do. Any questions?"

"I really hate this part. Do I have to go?"

Cletis turned his unblinking eyes on Theodore.

"We have an arrangement. You do your part and I don't... well, let's just leave that to your imagination, shall we?"

Five hours later Theodore once again knocked on the proprietor's office door.

"Come in, come in. Sit down. You must tell me every detail. How did it go? Since you are here in one piece, I assume our plan went well."

Theodore glanced around for a chair. They were all against the distant side walls. Not having ever received an offer to sit in this office before, he was unsure about traveling all the way to the nearest wall and wrestling a heavy, upholstered chair across the expensive carpet to the front of Mr. Johnston's desk. The legs of the chair would surely leave drag marks against the nap. A trail pointing straight to the guilty party. Theodore elected to stand.

"Well, sir, I waited the two hours



like you told me, then I bonded out Harvey Lightfoot. He knew where he could get a handgun, so I drove him to his friend's house and waited outside. When he came back to the car, he had a .357 Magnum, a rather loud weapon as it turns out. The two of us then returned to the jail, and I bonded out Jack Niedekker."

"And was our Mr. Niedekker glad to see you?"

Theodore frowned in recollection.

"Since I was driving, I had Jack sit up front with me. Harvey sat in the back. That way they didn't have time to plot amongst themselves. Jack was extremely quiet as if he had something on his mind. I actually think that at one point he was considering how to double cross us."

A low chuckle escaped from the proprietor's throat.

Theodore was astonished. He'd never before heard Mr. Johnston laugh in the ten years that he'd known him. Mr. Johnston was not a man who took pleasure in normal humor.

"That's rich. Go on, go on."

"Jack directed me to stop at a hardware store, where we obtained an extension ladder and one of those long poles that fruit growers use to trim tree branches. The kind of gardening tool that you pull on a rope and it manipulates pruning shears on the other end of the pole."

"Very good. I wondered how he would do that."

"We parked at the entrance to the alley and got out. Jack led the way, I carried the pole, and Harvey got stuck with the ladder. By the time we got to the second block of

the alley, Harvey had worked up a sweat and wasn't very happy about the long walk with him carrying all the weight. Jack claimed that he was just making sure we weren't being followed."

Cletis interrupted.

"The jewels were in the second block of the alley."

"That's what Jack said," continued Theodore. "Anyway, Jack put the ladder against the wall of one building and had Harvey climb up on the roof. I handed up the pole, and Jack told Harvey to cut the tied laces on the first pair of tennis shoes hanging from the power lines. Harvey was afraid that he'd get shocked if the pole touched one of the hot lines, but Jack said he was just being a pansy and called him other names until he made Harvey mad enough to go ahead and cut the pair of shoes down."

"Tell me about the look on Jack's face when he got the shoes."

"Well, Jack caught both shoes when they fell and opened them up, but all that came out was a pair of brand-new, rolled up gym socks. Jack looked like he'd been smacked in the stomach with a baseball bat."

"A true Kodak Moment. I should've had you take a camera. Continue."

"Jack hollered for Harvey to cut down the next pair of tennis shoes. Harvey wasn't happy. He stared at Jack for a long while, then cut down the next pair. Nothing. Nothing in the third pair either. In desperation, Jack looked up at Harvey on the rooftop and swore on his mother's grave that the jewels had been in the first pair of tennis shoes.

That's when Harvey drew out his .357 Magnum and shot Jack three times in the chest."

Cletis held out the palm of his hand to stop Theodore's recitation.

"An untimely end to a brilliant thieving career."

There was a moment of silence.

"Now finish the story."

"At that point, cops flooded the area. They came from everywhere. I swear..."

"And our Mr. Lightfoot?"

"Harvey was trapped on the roof. He tried to make a stand but only had three bullets left and didn't have a chance. I swear the cops were everywhere, even hiding in the dumpsters waiting for us."

"So you see, Theodore, all that time you were covered by police all the way. There was nothing to worry about. I had instructed my friend the precinct captain to keep you well protected. For as long as we do a profitable business together, I have no intention of putting you at risk."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that. But I do have a question."

Cletis nodded.

"How did you know where the jewels were?"

"Think about it, Theodore. When one needs to make a quick escape on foot, one does not wear broken-down shoes with worn-out leather soles. And then there was the barefoot wino in the alley that Jack traveled through."

"How'd you get the jewels down without cutting the laces?"

"Theodore, you said a question. You try my patience. Perhaps you would like your right little finger to match your left pinky?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry. Won't happen again, sir."

"Very well. Remember to drop by the courthouse tomorrow morning and retrieve the bonds we placed on our last two clients. They won't be needing them any more. You might have to show death certificates. And on your way home tonight, take the key ring lying on the secretary's desk in the outer office and return it to the field supervisor of the Bay Gas and Electric Company. He'll know where to find his utility truck with the 'cherry picker' as they call it on the back."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Johnston."

Theodore headed for the door.

"Oh, and Theodore, don't be late for work tomorrow. There's a Mr. McGregor who's been arrested for defrauding hospitalized senior citizens in a multimillion dollar scam. McGregor appears to be the silent owner of a prime piece of land where, I hear, some Eastern developers are thinking about putting up a shopping mall. I've contemplated for some time that I should go into the real estate business. And since I hear that no one else wants to go Mr. McGregor's bond, I think we should do him. Don't you?"

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Facts of Life

W. Somerset Maugham





**I**t was Henry Garnet's habit on leaving the city of an afternoon to drop in at his club and play bridge before going home to dinner. He was a pleasant man to play with. He knew the game well, and you could be sure that he would make the best of his cards. He was a good loser, and when he won he was more inclined to ascribe his success to his luck than to his skill. He was indulgent and, if his partner made a mistake, could be trusted to find an excuse for him. It was surprising then on this occasion to hear him telling his partner with unnecessary sharpness that he had never seen a hand worse played, and it was more surprising still to see him not only make a grave error himself, an error of which you would never have thought him capable, but when his partner, not unwilling to get a little of his own back, pointed it out, insist against all reason and with considerable heat that he was perfectly right. But they were all old friends, the men he was playing with, and none of them took his ill humour very seriously. Henry Garnet was a broker, a partner in a firm of repute, and it occurred to one of them that something had gone wrong with some stock he was interested in.

"How's the market today?" he asked.

"Booming. Even the suckers are making money."

It was evident that stocks and shares had nothing to do with Henry Garnet's vexation, but something was the matter, that was evident, too. He was a hearty fellow who enjoyed excellent health; he had plenty of money; he was fond of his wife and devoted to his children. As a rule he had high spirits, and he laughed easily at the nonsense they were apt to talk while they played, but today he sat glum and silent. His brows were crossly puckered, and there was a sulky look about his mouth. Presently, to ease the tension, one of the others mentioned a subject upon which they all knew Henry Garnet was glad to speak.

"How's your boy, Henry? I see he's done pretty well in the tournament."

Henry Garnet's frown grew darker.

"He's done no better than I expected him to."

"When does he come back from Monte?"

"He got back last night."

"Did he enjoy himself?"

"I suppose so; all I know is that he made a damned fool of himself."

"Oh. How?"

"I'd rather not talk about it if you don't mind."

The three men looked at him with curiosity. Henry Garnet scowled at the green baize.

"Sorry, old boy. Your call."

The game proceeded in a strained silence. Garnet got his bid, and when he played his cards so badly that he went three down, not a word

was said. Another rubber was begun, and in the second game Garnet denied a suit. "Having none?" his partner asked him.

Garnet's irritability was such that he did not even reply, and when at the end of the hand it appeared that he had revoked, and that his revoke cost the rubber, it was not to be expected that his partner should let his carelessness go without remark. "What the devil's the matter with you, Henry?" he said. "You're playing like a fool."

Garnet was disconcerted. He did not so much mind losing a big rubber himself, but he was sore that his inattention should have made his partner lose, too. He pulled himself together.

"I'd better not play any more. I thought a few rubbers would calm me, but the fact is I can't give my mind to the game. To tell you the truth, I'm in a hell of a temper."

They all burst out laughing.

"You don't have to tell us that, old boy. It's obvious."

Garnet gave them a rueful smile. "Well, I bet you'd be in a temper if what's happened to me had happened to you. As a matter of fact I'm in a damned awkward situation, and if any of you fellows can give me any advice how to deal with it I'd be grateful."

"Let's have a drink and you tell us all about it. With a K.C., a Home Office official and an eminent surgeon—if we can't tell you how to deal with a situation, nobody can."

The K.C. got up and rang the bell for a waiter.

"It's about that damned boy of mine," said Henry Garnet.

Drinks were ordered and brought. And this is the story Henry Garnet told them.

The boy of whom he spoke was his only son. His name was Nicholas, and of course he was called Nicky. He was eighteen. The Garnets had two daughters besides, one of sixteen and the other of twelve, but however unreasonable it seemed, for a father is generally supposed to like his daughters best, and though he did all he could not to show his preference, there was no doubt that the greater share of Henry Garnet's affection was given to his son. He was kind, in a chafing, casual way, to his daughters and gave them handsome presents on their birthdays and at Christmas, but he doted on Nicky. Nothing was too good for him. He thought the world of him. He could hardly take his eyes off him. You could not blame him, for Nicky was a son that any parent might have been proud of. He was six foot two, lithe but muscular, with broad shoulders and a slim waist, and he held himself gallantly erect; he had a charming head, well placed on the shoulders, with pale brown hair that waved slightly, blue eyes with long dark lashes under well-marked eyebrows, a full red mouth and a tanned, clean skin. When he smiled, he showed very regular and very white teeth. He was not shy, but there was a modesty in his demeanour that was attractive. In social inter-

course he was easy, polite, and quietly gay. He was the offspring of nice, healthy, decent parents, he had been well brought up in a good home, he had been sent to a good school, and the general result was as engaging a specimen of young manhood as you were likely to find in a long time. You felt that he was as honest, open, and virtuous as he looked. He had never given his parents a moment's uneasiness. As a child he was seldom ill and never naughty. As a boy he did everything that was expected of him. His school reports were excellent. He was wonderfully popular, and he ended his career, with a creditable number of prizes, as head of the school and captain of the football team. But this was not all. At the age of fourteen Nicky had developed an unexpected gift for lawn tennis. This was a game that his father not only was fond of but played very well, and when he discerned in the boy the promise of a tennis player, he fostered it. During the holidays he had him taught by the best professionals, and by the time he was sixteen he had won a number of tournaments for boys of his age. He could beat his father so badly that only parental affection reconciled the older player to the poor show he put up. At eighteen Nicky went to Cambridge, and Henry Garnet conceived the ambition that before he was through with the university he should play for it. Nicky had all the qualifications for becoming a great tennis player. He was tall, he had a long reach, he was quick on his feet, and his timing was perfect. He realized instinctively where the ball was coming and, seemingly without hurry, was there to take it. He had a powerful serve, with a nasty break that made it difficult to return, and his forehand drive, low, long, and accurate, was deadly. He was not so good on the backhand and his volleying was wild, but all through the summer before he went to Cambridge Henry Garnet made him work on these points under the best teacher in England. At the back of his mind, though he did not even mention it to Nicky, he cherished a further ambition, to see his son play at Wimbledon and, who could tell, perhaps be chosen to represent his country in the Davis Cup. A great lump came into Henry Garnet's throat as he saw in fancy his son leap over the net to shake hands with the American champion whom he had just defeated and walk off the court to the deafening plaudits of the multitude.

As an assiduous frequenter of Wimbledon, Henry Garnet had a good many friends in the tennis world, and one evening he found himself at a city dinner sitting next to one of them, a Colonel Brabazon, and in due course began talking to him of Nicky and what chance there might be of his being chosen to play for his university during the following season.

"Why don't you let him go down to Monte Carlo and play in the spring tournament there?" said the colonel suddenly.

"Oh, I don't think he's good enough for that. He's not nineteen yet, he

only went up to Cambridge last October; he wouldn't stand a chance against all those cracks."

"Of course Austin and Von Cramm and so on would knock spots off him, but he might snatch a game or two, and if he got up against some of the smaller fry, there's no reason why he shouldn't win two or three matches. He's never been up against any of the first-rate players, and it would be wonderful practice for him. He'd learn a lot more than he'll ever learn in the seaside tournaments you enter him for."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I'm not going to let him leave Cambridge in the middle of a term. I've always impressed upon him that tennis is only a game and it mustn't interfere with work."

Colonel Brabazon asked Garnet when the term ended.

"That's all right. He'd only have to cut about three days. Surely that could be arranged. You see, two of the men we were depending on have let us down, and we're in a hole. We want to send as good a team as we can. The Germans are sending their best players, and so are the Americans."

"Nothing doing, old boy. In the first place, Nicky's not good enough, and secondly, I don't fancy the idea of sending a kid like that to Monte Carlo without anyone to look after him. If I could get away myself, I might think of it, but that's out of the question."

"I shall be there. I'm going as the nonplaying captain of the English team. I'll keep an eye on him."

"You'll be busy, and besides, it's not a responsibility I'd like to ask you to take. He's never been abroad in his life, and to tell you the truth, I shouldn't have a moment's peace all the time he was there."

They left it at that, and presently Henry Garnet went home. He was so flattered by Colonel Brabazon's suggestion that he could not help telling his wife.

"Fancy his thinking Nicky's as good as that. He told me he'd seen him play and his style was fine. He only wants more practice to get into the first flight. We shall see the kid playing in the semifinals at Wimbledon yet, old girl."

To his surprise Mrs. Garnet was not so much opposed to the notion as he would have expected. "After all the boy's eighteen. Nicky's never got into mischief yet, and there's no reason to suppose he will now."

"There's his work to be considered; don't forget that. I think it would be a very bad precedent to let him cut the end of term."

"But what can three days matter? It seems a shame to rob him of a chance like that. I'm sure he'd jump at it if you asked him."

"Well, I'm not going to. I haven't sent him to Cambridge just to play tennis. I know he's steady, but it's silly to put temptation in his way. He's much too young to go to Monte Carlo by himself."

"You say he won't have a chance against these crack players, but you can't tell."

Henry Garnet sighed a little. On the way home in the car it had struck him that Austin's health was uncertain and that Von Cramm had his off days. Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that Nicky had a bit of luck like that—then there would be no doubt that he would be chosen to play for Cambridge. But of course that was all nonsense.

"Nothing doing, my dear. I've made up my mind, and I'm not going to change it."

Mrs. Garnet held her peace. But next day she wrote to Nicky, telling him what had happened, and suggested to him what she would do in his place if, wanting to go, he wished to get his father's consent. A day or two later Henry Garnet received a letter from his son. He was bubbling over with excitement. He had seen his tutor, who was a tennis player himself, and the provost of his college, who happened to know Colonel Brabazon, and no objection would be made to his leaving before the end of term; they both thought it an opportunity that shouldn't be missed. He didn't see what harm he could come to, and if only, just this once, his father would stretch a point, well, next term, he promised faithfully, he'd work like blazes. It was a very pretty letter. Mrs. Garnet watched her husband read it at the breakfast table; she was undisturbed by the frown on his face. He threw it over to her.

"I don't know why you thought it necessary to tell Nicky something I told you in confidence. It's too bad of you. Now you've thoroughly unsettled him."

"I'm so sorry. I thought it would please him to know that Colonel Brabazon had such a high opinion of him. I don't see why one should only tell people the disagreeable things that are said about them. Of course I made it quite clear that there could be no question of his going."

"You've put me in an odious position. If there's anything I hate, it's for the boy to look upon me as a spoilsport and a tyrant."

"Oh, he'll never do that. He may think you rather silly and unreasonable, but I'm sure he'll understand that it's only for his own good that you're being so unkind."

"Christ," said Henry Garnet.

His wife had a great inclination to laugh. She knew the battle was won. Dear oh dear, how easy it was to get men to do what you wanted. For appearance's sake, Henry Garnet held out for forty-eight hours, but then he yielded and a fortnight later Nicky came to London. He was to start for Monte Carlo next morning, and after dinner, when Mrs. Garnet and her elder daughter had left them, Henry took the opportunity to give his son some good advice.

"I don't feel quite comfortable about letting you go off to a place like Monte Carlo at your age practically by yourself," he finished, "but there it is, and I can only hope you'll be sensible. I don't want to play the

heavy father, but there are three things especially that I want to warn you against: one is gambling, don't gamble; the second is money, don't lend anyone money; and the third is women, don't have anything to do with women. If you don't do any of those three things you can't come to much harm, so remember them well."

"All right, Father," Nicky smiled.

"That's my last word to you. I know the world pretty well, and believe me, my advice is sound."

"I won't forget it. I promise you."

"That's a good chap. Now let's go up and join the ladies."

Nicky beat neither Austin nor Von Cramm in the Monte Carlo tournament, but he did not disgrace himself. He snatched an unexpected victory over a Spanish player and gave one of the Austrians a closer match than anyone had thought possible. In the mixed doubles he got into the semifinals. His charm conquered everyone, and he vastly enjoyed himself. It was generally allowed that he showed promise, and Colonel Brabazon told him that when he was a little older and had had more practice with first-class players he would be a credit to his father. The tournament came to an end, and the day following he was to fly back to London. Anxious to play his best, he had lived very carefully, smoking little and drinking nothing and going to bed early, but on his last evening he thought he would like to see something of the life in Monte Carlo of which he had heard so much. An official dinner was given to the tennis players, and after dinner with the rest of them he went into the Sporting Club. It was the first time he had been there. Nicky had never before seen roulette played except in the pictures; in a maze he stopped at the first table he came to; chips of different sizes were scattered over the green cloth in what looked like a hopeless muddle; the croupier gave the wheel a sharp turn and with a flick threw in the little white ball. After what seemed an endless time the ball stopped, and another croupier, with a broad, indifferent gesture, raked in the chips of those who had lost.

Presently Nicky wandered over to where they were playing *trente et quarante*, but he couldn't understand what it was all about and he thought it dull. He saw a crowd in another room and sauntered in. A big game of baccarat was in progress, and he was immediately conscious of the tension. The players were protected from the thronging bystanders by a brass rail; they sat round the table, nine on each side, with the dealer in the middle and the croupier facing him. Big money was changing hands. The dealer was a member of the Greek syndicate. Nicky looked at his impassive face. His eyes were watchful, but his expression never changed whether he won or lost. It was a terrifying, strangely impressive sight. It gave Nicky, who had been thriftily brought up, a peculiar thrill to see someone risk a thousand pounds on



the turn of a card and, when he lost, make a little joke and laugh. It was all terribly exciting. An acquaintance came up to him.

"Been doing any good?" he asked.

"I haven't been playing."

"Wise of you. Rotten game. Come and have a drink."

"All right."

While they were having it Nicky told his friend that this was the first time he had ever been in the rooms.

"Oh, but you must have one little flutter before you go. It's idiotic to leave Monte without having tried your luck. After all, it won't hurt you to lose a hundred francs or so."

"I don't suppose it will, but my father wasn't any too keen on my coming at all and one of the three things he particularly advised me not to do was gamble."

But when Nicky left his companion, he strolled back to one of the tables where they were playing roulette. He stood for a while looking at the losers' money being raked in by the croupier and the money that was won paid out to the winners. It was impossible to deny that it was thrilling. His friend was right, it did seem silly to leave Monte without putting something on the table just once. It would be an experience, and at his age you had to have all the experience you could get. He reflected that he hadn't promised his father not to gamble, he'd promised him not to forget his advice. It wasn't quite the same, was it? He took a hundred franc note out of his pocket and slyly put it on number eighteen. He chose it because that was his age. With a wildly beating heart he watched the wheel turn; the little white ball whizzed about like a small demon of mischief; the wheel went round more slowly, the little white ball hesitated, it seemed about to stop, it went on again; Nicky could hardly believe his eyes when it fell into number eighteen. A lot of chips were passed over to him, and his hands trembled as he took them. It seemed to amount to a lot of money. He was so confused that he never thought of putting anything on the following round; in fact he had no intention of playing any more, once was enough, and he was surprised when eighteen again came up. There was only one chip on it.

"By George, you've won again," said a man who was standing near him.

"Me? I hadn't got anything on."

"Yes, you had. Your original stake. They always leave it on unless you ask for it back. Didn't you know?"

Another packet of chips was handed over to him. Nicky's head reeled. He counted his gains: seven thousand francs. A queer sense of power seized him; he felt wonderfully clever. This was the easiest way of making money that he had ever heard of. His frank, charming face was wreathed in smiles. His bright eyes met those of a woman standing by his side. She smiled. "You're in luck," she said.

She spoke English but with a foreign accent.

"I can hardly believe it. It's the first time I've played."

"That explains it. Lend me a thousand francs, will you? I've lost everything I've got. I'll give it you back in half an hour."

"All right."

She took a large red chip from his pile and with a word of thanks disappeared. The man who had spoken to him before grunted.

"You'll never see that again."

Nicky was dashed. His father had particularly advised him not to lend anyone money. What a silly thing to do! And to somebody he'd never seen in his life. But the fact was, he felt at the moment such a love for the human race that it had never occurred to him to refuse. And that big red chip, it was almost impossible to realize that it had any value. Oh well, it didn't matter, he still had six thousand francs, he'd just try his luck once or twice more, and if he didn't win, he'd go home. He put a chip on sixteen, which was his elder sister's age, but it didn't come up; then on twelve, which was his younger sister's age, and that didn't come up either; he tried various numbers at random but without success. It was funny, he seemed to have lost his knack. He thought he would try just once more and then stop; he won. He made up all his losses and had something over. At the end of an hour, after various ups and downs, having experienced such thrills as he had never known in his life, he found himself with so many chips that they would hardly go in his pockets. He decided to go. He went to the changer's office, and he gasped when twenty thousand-franc notes were spread out before him. He had never had so much money in his life. He put it in his pocket and was turning away when the woman to whom he had lent the thousand francs came up to him.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," she said. "I was afraid you'd gone. I was in a fever, I didn't know what you'd think of me. Here's your thousand francs, and thank you so much for the loan."

Nicky, blushing scarlet, stared at her with amazement. How he had misjudged her! His father had said, don't gamble; well, he had, and he'd made twenty thousand francs; and his father had said, don't lend anyone money; well, he had, he'd lent quite a lot to a total stranger, and she'd returned it. The fact was that he wasn't nearly such a fool as his father thought: he'd had an instinct that he could lend her the money with safety, and you see, his instinct was right. But he was so obviously taken aback that the little lady was forced to laugh.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth, I never expected to see the money back."

"What did you take me for? Did you think I was a—cocotte?"

Nicky reddened to the roots of his wavy hair. "No, of course not."

"Do I look like one?"

"Not a bit."

She was dressed very quietly, in black, with a string of gold beads round her neck; her simple frock showed off a neat, slight figure; she had a pretty little face and a trim head. She was made up but not excessively, and Nicky supposed that she was not more than three or four years older than himself. She gave him a friendly smile.

"My husband is in the administration in Morocco, and I've come to Monte Carlo for a few weeks because he thought I wanted a change."

"I was just going," said Nicky because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Already!"

"Well, I've got to get up early tomorrow. I'm going back to London by air."

"Of course. The tournament ended today, didn't it? I saw you play, you know, two or three times."

"Did you? I don't know why you should have noticed me."

"You've got a beautiful style. And you looked very sweet in your shorts."

Nicky was not an immodest youth, but it did cross his mind that perhaps she had borrowed that thousand francs in order to scrape acquaintance with him.

"Do you ever go to the Knickerbocker?" she asked.

"No, I never have."

"Oh, but you mustn't leave Monte without having been there. Why don't you come and dance a little? To tell you the truth, I'm starving with hunger, and I should adore some bacon and eggs."

Nicky remembered his father's advice not to have anything to do with women, but this was different; you had only to look at the pretty little thing to know at once that she was perfectly respectable. Her husband was in what corresponded, he supposed, to the civil service. His father and mother had friends who were civil servants, and they and their wives sometimes came to dinner. It was true that the wives were neither so young nor so pretty as this one, but she was just as ladylike as they were. And after winning twenty thousand francs he thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a little fun.

"I'd love to go with you," he said. "But you won't mind if I don't stay very long. I've left instructions at my hotel that I'm to be called at seven."

"We'll leave as soon as ever you like."

Nicky found it very pleasant at the Knickerbocker. He ate his bacon and eggs with appetite. They shared a bottle of champagne. They danced, and the little lady told him he danced beautifully. He knew he danced pretty well, and of course she was easy to dance with. As light as a feather. She laid her cheek against his, and when their eyes met,

there was in hers a smile that made his heart go pit-a-pat. A coloured woman sang in a throaty, sensual voice. The floor was crowded.

"Have you ever been told that you're very goodlooking?" she asked.

"I don't think so," he laughed. Gosh, he thought, I believe she's fallen for me.

Nicky was not such a fool as to be unaware that women often liked him, and when she made that remark, he pressed her to him a little more closely. She closed her eyes, and a faint sigh escaped her lips.

"I suppose it wouldn't be quite nice if I kissed you before all these people," he said.

"What do you think they would take me for?"

It began to grow late, and Nicky said that he really thought he ought to be going.

"I shall go, too," she said. "Will you drop me at my hotel on your way?"

Nicky paid the bill. He was rather surprised at its amount, but with all that money he had in his pocket he could afford not to care, and they got into a taxi. She snuggled up to him, and he kissed her. She seemed to like it. By Jove, he thought, I wonder if there's anything doing.

It was true that she was a married woman, but her husband was in Morocco, and it certainly did look as if she'd fallen for him. Good and proper. It was true also that his father had warned him to have nothing to do with women but, he reflected again, he hadn't actually promised he wouldn't, he'd only promised not to forget his advice. Well, he hadn't; he was bearing it in mind that very minute. But circumstances alter cases. She was a sweet little thing; it seemed silly to miss the chance of an adventure that was handed to you like that on a tray. When they reached the hotel, he paid off the taxi.

"I'll walk home," he said. "The air will do me good after the stuffy atmosphere of that place."

"Come up a moment," she said. "I'd like to show you the photo of my little boy."

"Oh, have you got a little boy?" he exclaimed, a trifle dashed.

"Yes, a sweet little boy."

He walked upstairs after her. He didn't in the least want to see the photograph of her little boy, but he thought it only civil to pretend he did. He was afraid he'd made a fool of himself; it occurred to him that she was taking him up to look at the photograph in order to show him in a nice way that he'd made a mistake. He'd told her he was eighteen.

"I suppose she thinks I'm just a kid."

He began to wish he hadn't spent all that money on champagne at the nightclub.

But she didn't show him the photograph of her little boy at all. They had no sooner got into her room than she turned to him, flung her arms

round his neck, and kissed him full on the lips. He had never in all his life been kissed so passionately. "Darling," she said.

For a brief moment his father's advice once more crossed Nicky's mind, and then he forgot it.

Nicky was a light sleeper, and the least sound was apt to wake him. Two or three hours later he awoke and for a moment could not imagine where he was. The room was not quite dark, for the door of the bathroom was ajar, and the light in it had been left on. Suddenly he was conscious that someone was moving about the room. Then he remembered. He saw that it was his little friend, and he was on the point of speaking when something in the way she was behaving stopped him. She was walking very cautiously as though she were afraid of waking him; she stopped once or twice and looked over at the bed. He wondered what she was after. He soon saw. She went over to the chair on which he had placed his clothes and once more looked in his direction. She waited for what seemed to him an interminable time. The silence was so intense that Nicky thought he could hear his own heart beating. Then, very slowly, very quietly, she took up his coat, slipped her hand into the inside pocket and drew out all those beautiful thousand franc notes that Nicky had been so proud to win. She put the coat back and placed some other clothes on it so that it should look as though it had not been disturbed; then, with the bundle of notes in her hand, for an appreciable time stood once more stock-still. Nicky had repressed an instinctive impulse to jump up and grab her; it was partly surprise that kept him quiet, partly the notion that he was in a strange hotel, in a foreign country, and if he made a row, he didn't know what might happen. She looked at him. His eyes were partly closed, and he was sure that she thought he was asleep. In the silence she could hardly fail to hear his regular breathing. When she had reassured herself that her movements had not disturbed him, she stepped, with infinite caution, across the room. On a small table in the window a cineraria was growing in a pot. Nicky watched her now with his eyes wide open. The plant was evidently placed quite loosely in the pot, for, taking it by the stalks, she lifted it out; she put the bank notes in the bottom of the pot and replaced the plant. It was an excellent hiding place. No one could have guessed that anything was concealed under that richly flowering plant. She pressed the earth down with her fingers and then, very slowly, taking care not to make the smallest noise, crept across the room and slipped back into bed.

"*Chéri*," she said in a caressing voice.

Nicky breathed steadily, like a man immersed in deep sleep. The little lady turned over on her side and disposed herself to slumber. But though Nicky lay so still, his thoughts worked busily. He was extreme-

ly indignant at the scene he had just witnessed, and to himself he spoke his thoughts with vigour.

She's nothing but a damned tart. She and her dear little boy and her husband in Morocco. My eye! She's a rotten thief, that's what she is. Took me for a mug. If she thinks she's going to get away with anything like that, she's mistaken.

He had already made up his mind what he was going to do with the money he had so cleverly won. He had long wanted a car of his own and had thought it rather mean of his father not to have given him one. After all, a feller doesn't always want to drive about in the family bus. Well, he'd just teach the old man a lesson and buy one himself. For twenty thousand francs, two hundred pounds roughly, he could get a very decent second-hand car. He meant to get the money back, but just then he didn't quite know how. He didn't like the idea of kicking up a row, he was a stranger, in a hotel he knew nothing of; it might very well be that the beastly woman had friends there; he didn't mind facing anyone in a fair fight, but he'd look pretty foolish if someone pulled a gun on him. He reflected besides, very sensibly, that he had no proof that the money was his. If it came to a showdown and she swore it was hers, he might very easily find himself hauled off to a police station. He really didn't know what to do. Presently by her regular breathing he knew that the little lady was asleep. She must have fallen asleep with an easy mind, for she had done her job without a hitch. It infuriated Nicky that she should rest so peacefully while he lay awake, worried to death. Suddenly an idea occurred to him. It was such a good one that it was only by the exercise of all his self-control that he prevented himself from jumping out of bed and carrying it out at once. Two could play at her game. She'd stolen his money; well, he'd steal it back again, and they'd be all square. He made up his mind to wait quite quietly until he was sure that deceitful woman was sound asleep. He waited for what seemed to him a very long time. She did not stir. Her breathing was as regular as a child's.

"Darling," he said at last.

No answer. No movement. She was dead to the world. Very slowly, pausing after every movement, very silently, he slipped out of bed. He stood still for a while, looking at her to see whether he had disturbed her. Her breathing was as regular as before. During the time he was waiting he had taken note carefully of the furniture in the room so that in crossing it he should not knock against a chair or a table and make a noise. He took a couple of steps and waited; he took a couple of steps more; he was very light on his feet and made no sound as he walked; he took fully five minutes to get to the window, and here he waited again. He started, for the bed slightly creaked, but it was only because the sleeper turned in her sleep. He forced himself to wait till he had



counted one hundred. She was sleeping like a log. With infinite care he seized the cineraria by the stalks and gently pulled it out of the pot; he put his other hand in, his heart beat nineteen to the dozen as his fingers touched the notes, his hand closed on them, and he slowly drew them out. He replaced the plant and in his turn carefully pressed down the earth. While he was doing all this, he had kept one eye on the form lying on the bed. It remained still. After another pause he crept softly to the chair on which his clothes were lying. He first put the bundle of notes in his coat pocket and then proceeded to dress. It took him a good quarter of an hour because he could afford to make no sound. He had been wearing a soft shirt with his dinner jacket, and he congratulated himself on this because it was easier to put on silently than a stiff one. He had some difficulty in tying his tie without a looking glass, but he very wisely reflected that it didn't really matter if it wasn't tied very well. His spirits were rising. The whole thing now began to seem rather a lark. At length he was completely dressed except for his shoes, which he took in his hand; he thought he would put them on when he got into the passage. Now he had to cross the room to get to the door. He reached it so quietly that he could not have disturbed the lightest sleeper. But the door had to be unlocked. He turned the key very slowly; it creaked.

"Who's that?" The little woman suddenly sat up in bed. Nicky's heart jumped to his mouth. He made a great effort to keep his head.

"It's only me. It's six o'clock, and I've got to go. I was trying not to wake you."

"Oh, I forgot." She sank back onto the pillow.

"Now that you're awake, I'll put on my shoes."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and did this.

"Don't make a noise when you go out. The hotel people don't like it. Oh, I'm so sleepy"

"You go right off to sleep again."

"Kiss me before you go." He bent down and kissed her. "You're a sweet boy and a wonderful lover. *Bon voyage.*"

Nicky did not feel quite safe till he got out of the hotel. The dawn had broken. The sky was unclouded, and in the harbour the yachts and the fishing boats lay motionless on the still water. On the quay fishermen were getting ready to start on their day's work. The streets were deserted. Nicky took a long breath of the sweet morning air. He felt alert and well. He also felt pleased as Punch. With a swinging stride, his shoulders well thrown back, he walked up the hill and along the gardens in front of the casino—the flowers in that clear light had a dewy brilliance that was delicious—till he came to his hotel. Here the day had already begun. In the hall, porters with mufflers round their necks and berets on their heads were busy sweeping. Nicky went up to his

room and had a hot bath. He lay in it and thought with satisfaction that he was not such a mug as some people might think. After his bath he did his exercises, dressed, packed, and went down to breakfast. He had a grand appetite. No Continental breakfast for him! He had grape-fruit, porridge, bacon and eggs, rolls fresh from the oven, so crisp and delicious they melted in your mouth, marmalade, and three cups of coffee. Though feeling perfectly well before, he felt better after that.

He lit the pipe he had recently learnt to smoke, paid his bill, and stepped into the car that was waiting to take him to the aerodrome on the other side of Cannes. The road as far as Nice ran over the hills, and below him was the blue sea and the coastline. He couldn't help thinking it damned pretty. They passed through Nice, so gay and friendly in the early morning, and presently they came to a long stretch of straight road that ran by the sea.

Nicky had paid his bill not with the money he had won the night before but with the money his father had given him; he had changed a thousand francs to pay for supper at the Knickerbocker, but that deceitful little woman had returned him the thousand francs he had lent her, so that he still had twenty thousand-franc notes in his pocket. He thought he would like to have a look at them. He had so nearly lost them that they had a double value for him. He took them out of his hip pocket into which for safety's sake he had stuffed them when he put on the suit he was traveling in, and counted them one by one. Something very strange had happened to them. Instead of there being twenty notes, as there should have been, there were twenty-six. He couldn't understand it at all. He counted them twice more. There was no doubt about it; somehow or other he had twenty-six thousand francs instead of the twenty he should have had. He couldn't make it out. He asked himself it if was possible that he had won more at the Sporting Club than he had realized. But no, that was out of the question; he distinctly remembered the man at the desk laying the notes out in four rows of five, and he had counted them himself. Suddenly the explanation occurred to him: when he had put his hand into the flowerpot, after taking out the cineraria, he had grabbed everything he felt there. The flowerpot was the little hussy's moneybox, and he had taken out not only his own money but her savings as well. Nicky leant back in the car and burst into a roar of laughter. It was the funniest thing he'd ever heard in his life. And when he thought of her going to the flowerpot sometime later in the morning when she awoke, expecting to find the money she had so cleverly got away with and finding, not only that it wasn't there, but that her own had gone, too, he laughed more than ever. And so far as he was concerned there was nothing to do about it, he knew neither her name nor the name of the hotel to which she had taken him. He couldn't return her money even if he wanted to.

"It serves her damned well right," he said.

This then was the story that Henry Garnet told his friends over the bridge table, for the night before, after dinner when his wife and daughter had left them to their port, Nicky had narrated it in full.

"And you know what infuriated me is that he's so damned pleased with himself. Talk of a cat swallowing a canary. And d'you know what he said to me when he'd finished? He looked at me with those innocent eyes of his and said, 'You know, Father, I can't help thinking there was something wrong about the advice you gave me. You said don't gamble; well, I did, and I made a packet; you said don't lend money; well, I did, and I got it back; and you said don't have anything to do with women; well, I did, and I made six thousand francs on the deal.'"

It didn't make it any better for Henry Garnet that his three companions burst out laughing.

"It's all very well for you fellows to laugh, but you know, I'm in a damned awkward position. The boy looked up to me, he respected me, he took whatever I said as gospel truth, and now, I saw it in his eyes, he just looks upon me as a driveling old fool. It's no good my saying one swallow doesn't make a summer; he doesn't see that it was just a fluke, he thinks the whole damn thing was due to his own cleverness. It may ruin him."

"You do look a bit of a damned fool, old man," said one of the others. "There's no denying that, is there?"

"I know I do, and I don't like it. It's so dashed unfair. Fate has no right to play one tricks like that. After all, you must admit that my advice was good."

"Very good."

"And the wretched boy ought to have burnt his fingers. Well, he hasn't. You're all men of the world, you tell me how I'm to deal with the situation now."

But they none of them could.

"Well, Henry, if I were you, I wouldn't worry," said the lawyer. "My belief is that your boy's been born lucky, and in the long run that's better than to be born clever or rich."

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**R**obin White's **The Ice Curtain** (Delacorte, \$24.95) will undoubtedly be compared to Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park*, and rightly so. White's book also deserves the same wide audience that Smith's garnered, for White offers American readers a thriller set in present-day Russia—notably Siberia—that throbs with authenticity. Gregori Nowek is a native Siberian who was recruited to the police force by a man who would become both best friend and mentor. When Nowek sees the older man shot down outside an elite Moscow men's club, every reader knows that he will march into the mouth of hell in pursuit of justice—as in the hide-and-seek scene deep in a diamond mine in frozen Siberia. White crams in pictures of life in Russia today: the brutal winter weather and the shortages, the bureaucrats and the gangs, the crumbling infrastructure in contrast to the high-tech toys of the wealthy. Add to this a crew of colorful and crazy characters, a sense of the brooding Russian persona, a scary lesson in the worldwide diamond cartel, and much more, and you have a big thriller with a bestseller profile.

Carole Nelson Douglas reprises her exceptional heroine Irene Adler, diva, Sherlock Holmes's "The Woman," and consort to royalty. The book is **Chapel Noir** (Forge, \$25.95), set in Paris in 1889, the year of the Exposition, and it was worth the wait. Douglas teams Adler up with her faithful Boswell, the inestimable Penelope Huxleigh, and another bright young woman from Irene's own native land, America. (Score one for me here; I guessed her true identity before it was revealed.) A horrible, brutal double murder in one of Paris's most exclusive brothels opens the tale with a crime chillingly reminiscent of London's recent Jack the Ripper killings. Look here for appearances by Bram Stoker, the Prince of Wales, Sherlock Holmes, Buffalo Bill and his famed Indian tracker sidekick, and others. Prepare to view the wax museum, Paris's catacombs, and the city morgue, where elegantly dressed ladies and gents paraded past the city's recent corpses as if on review, a custom be-

gun during the French Revolution so that survivors could claim their dead. This is rich in characters, heady in atmosphere, and teeming with story. A word of warning, however: *Chapel Noir* is but the first installment in a series: This one even has a cliffhanger ending.

Nevada Barr's latest takes place during **Hunting Season** (Putnam, \$24.95), but fans of this series starring intrepid Park Ranger Anna Pigeon will be more interested to learn where the novel is located: the Natchez Trace Parkway. Like Anne Perry, Barr continues to uphold the standards set in the previous ten books in the series. This time there's a body laid out in a bedroom at historic Mt. Locust, an historic plantation-turned-inn. Clues left at the scene, including the state of the body, suggest a sadomasochistic scenario, but this ill fits the picture Anna soon builds up of the good ol' boy who is dead. Add to the mix a creepy mortician, a hostile subordinate at the Rangers' station, a terrorizing group of rednecks, a new boyfriend with divorce troubles, and the unexplained vandalism of a centuries-old slave cemetery, and you have whopping good read from Nevada Barr. Again.

Steve Thayer unravels the shocking story of what happened in **The Wheat Field** (Putnam, \$24.95) over the course of his novel, filling in the last pieces of the puzzle only in the final pages. Narrator Pliny Pennington is writing his memoirs and reflecting on 1960, the year he was a deputy sheriff in the small Wisconsin town of his birth. It was an election year as well when he was called to view the nude bodies of one of the town's golden couples, Michael and Maggie Butler; they'd apparently been surprised in the center of a perfect crop circle by a shotgun-wielding murderer. Reminiscent of Thomas Cook's suspense novels, Thayer's story pulls the reader deep into the secret heart of Kickapoo Falls, a small town run by a charismatic sheriff and the wealthy members of the prestigious Gun Club, surrounded by the pristine and awesome splendor of the Wisconsin Dells. Here Pennington grew up alongside Maggie, the town beauty; by the time she was cheerleading in high school, the narrator was already hopelessly in love with her. But the discovery of her body that morning under a blue sky pulls Pennington into a very tangled web of pornography, conspiracy, political assassination, and very personal betrayal, one that makes him the prime suspect and sends him on the run. Thayer has masterfully structured his story in layers gilded with suspense, each with a surprise inside: a nostalgic snapshot of life in small-town USA, a crazy moment in a teenager's football career, a chilling brush with death. Strong writing brings the people and places to life in this evocative suspense tale.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Jim DeKnight of Brigantine, New Jersey; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Mark Truman of Laguna Niguel, California; W. B. Borrebach of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania; Martha Bland of Midland, Texas; James



Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Susan LaCrocce of Brooklyn, New York; Henry Miller III of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Mary E. Durham of Austin, Texas; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Holly Nations of Prairie Grove, Arkansas; James A. Stewart of Laurel, Maryland; and Daniel LeBoeuf of Lake Orion, Michigan.

Hulton Getty / Tony Stone Images

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## NEARLY SCREWED BY A NAIL by Art Cosing

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There was a time when some hotels would polish your shoes overnight if you put them in front of your door before you went to sleep.

Helen Bell, a single parent with a six-year-old retarded daughter to support, provided that popular service for the Crown Plaza Hotel. She earned fifty cents for every pair of shoes she shined. It wasn't much, but it put food on the table.

That was before the hotel murder, of course. When well-known and feared crime boss Johnny Stoppard died from a poisoned nail in his shoe, all that changed.

Helen was the first person interrogated by the police. She had the time and the opportunity, the D.A. said.

Helen became an instant and infamous celebrity for many weeks. She was the prime suspect.

Irresponsible headline writers had a field day. "THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN WHO KILLED IN A SHOE," wrote one. "HELEN BELL: NO ONE WANTS TO BE IN HER SHOES," wrote another. "SHE PUT THE LAST NAIL IN THE HEEL'S COFFIN," wrote a third. One tabloid, predictably, took to calling her "The Sole Killer."

Helen might very well have been railroaded for the crime had not a rival gang leader owned up to the deed. In a last-minute deathbed confession he admitted his guilt.

Suddenly free of suspicion, savvy Helen hired a big-time literary agent, sold her story for six figures to Hollywood, opened up a new line of shoe polishes (appropriately named Rise and Shine), and lived happily ever after.

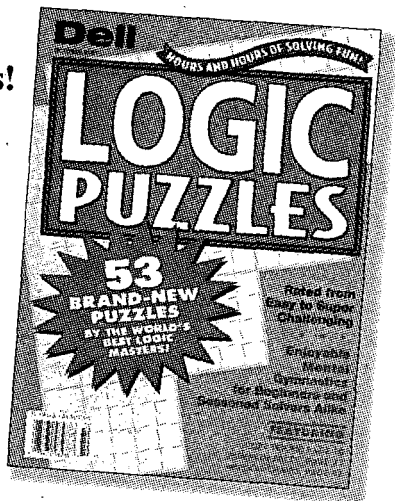


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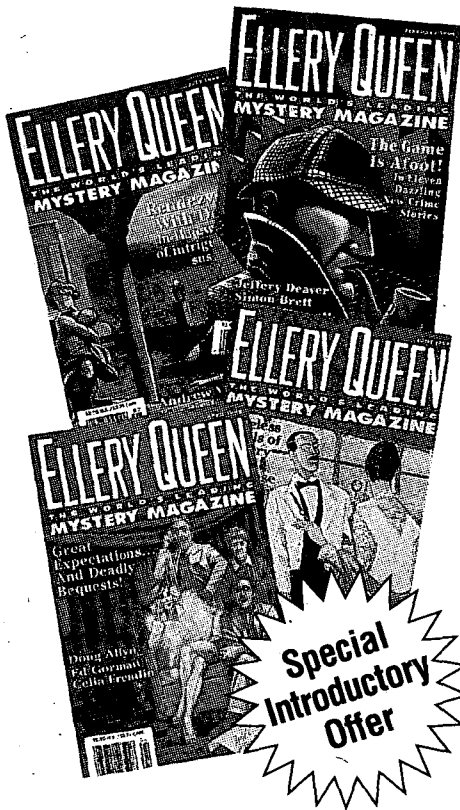
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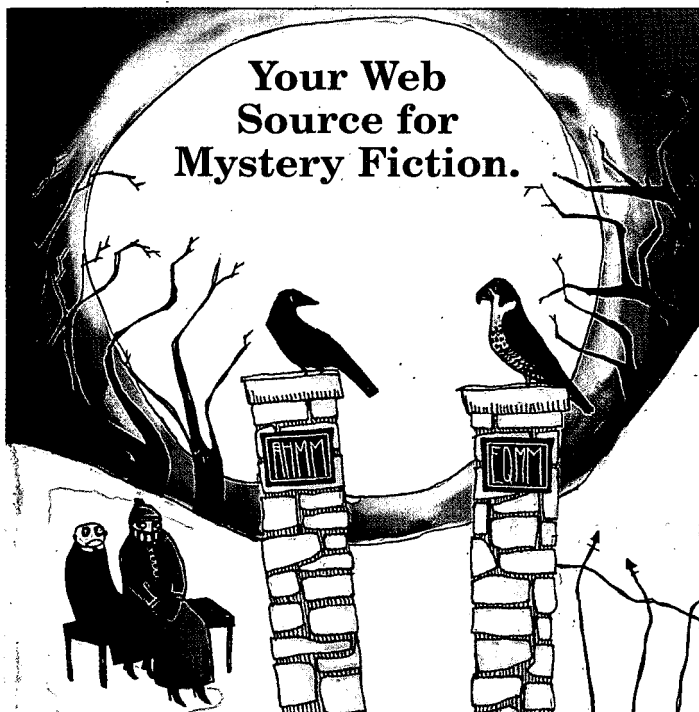
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